Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 48

The Lingering

Portion

Nevaeh- ‘This was my given title when I was in the Haven’s and not here… it’s there to remind me, that I was so good to all.’

‘Now I am God here and a woman!’ Said Nevaeh.

‘You still are good to all, what are you saying.’ Said Naddalin.

‘Yet as you were saying… before…’

‘I was saying that I was here once before, right before this all officially opened, I saw you, and then

you never- ever spent any time with me from that day on. And though I know there is lots of important work you are doing, you forgot about all that was to see- with me.

‘Well, you did not seem the slightest bit interested in me at all, and all you wanted to do is sleep, so now you can, you made it clear, that you did not want to sightsee with me; so-o…

There’s one exhibit that I’m extremely interested in, you want to come?’

‘No, you have fun.’

She swipes a guest guard standing off to the side- protecting Nevaeh, I hired hand holding a gun, Naddalin was now pressing her palms to the top of Nevaeh’s desk until the expected feeling came over her to go, as the guards' gun was tapping her backside.

‘Yet, you’ll trust them and not me? Ha.’ She spoke.

The location appears in her head yet was lost to be there only, no longer linked up with her anymore. A moment of sadness came over Naddalin and her face.

She pulled a book for the shives, then dropping it back in its slot, looking for the right one, she drops the first copy of her work, saying I want to keep this to remember me by, (I pick it up) as she leads me down a series of halls and up a few stairs, our path lit only by a series of flickering lights and the glint of the moon shining in through the many arched windows.

‘Is this really what you want or are you being contoured now?’

I ask, watching as she stands before a luminous painting titled The Guardian Angel Rachmiel holding a

baby girl, body still with awe, expression transformed into one of pure bliss.

She nods, unable to speak as she takes it all in, struggling to compose herself before revolving to me. ‘I’ve traveled a lot, I have seen all, now it’s time to sit and reflect.

‘This is not like you- what gives?’ Said Naddalin.

‘I have lingered in many places.’ Said Nevaeh.

‘Her mafia has ahold over you, don’t they?’ Squalled Naddalin.

Naddalin- Nonetheless, when I finally left, I thought that completely. Italy just over four centuries ago, was the same idea and where I was going to escape to for some R and R, this was the last time, I was going to ask. I was going to linger in the mind of a young girl that needed me, that I would be taking on as my new project, that required a guarded angel, that was living the lifestyle on earth, I never had yet wanted to with her, yeah-no, doing the romantic Venetian Gondola Rides my-self, and live in a city that was on the water edge. I swore I would never

return. And this would be the last time that she would ever see me.

The rebirth was over, and she needed me- not- so any longer, and my life- well- was complete too, I was more than ready to move on- and live life… All I wanted to do at this point was to live life… even lost in someone else's, I just wanted to live.

Even so, then I heard about the new school of artists also and knew this was for me too, for her- Melisa age 12 to get her life on track too, the Cristello family was going to be my new home away from home, she had learned the

craft from the masters, including my dear friend Lyndsey Dahl, who was fallen and to has moved on to a new project in the same parts, so I would not be alone, in a year a lot can change even me, I made new friends- I had to keep sane.

‘They started a new way of painting, influencing the next generation of artists.’

(One-week letter and Naddalin was starting to settle in.)

She motions to the painting before us, I am inside, face filled with wonder as she delicately,

sympathetically, and kindly shakes her head.

Naddalin- ‘Just look at the textures and the softness!’ Then saying moments after- ‘The strength of color and light!’

She heebie-jeebies her head. ‘It’s just dazzling!’ She says voice tinted with respect, admiration, worship, and awe of appreciation.

I glance between the painting and her reflected- back in me, looking through the same set of eyes, wishing I could see it in the same way as her, and

in a way, I do- it all perspective, a viewpoint, and belvedere.

Not as some old, inestimable, highly regarded picture hanging before me, but as a true thing of beauty, an object of glory, a miracle of genera.

She leads me to the next one, our hands grasped one on top of the other even if both hers the feeling is one to the other, as we marvel at a painting Claude Monet, her poor, pale body pierced with tears in her artery and arrows in her eyes- all of it appearing so real, I flinch- to her true feelings.

And that is when I get it. For the first time, I can see what Naddalin sees, we were linked, mind, body, and soul.

Finally understanding that the true journey of all great art is in taking an isolated experience and not just preserving it, or interpreting it, but sharing it for all time.

‘You must feel so-’ I shake my head and press my lips together, searching for just the right word.

‘I don’t know- influential, commanding, authoritative, prevailing, and controlling - I guess. To be able to

create something as beautiful as what we now have, art in a way coming together.’

I peer at her- looking back through the same eyes, knowing she can without difficulty create work with as much beauty and meaning as those that hang here, and it lingers when it has done and is long-lasting.

Nonetheless, she just shrugs, moving on to the next one, and I felt it all, as she says, ‘Other than our art class at school, I have not painted in years, even if I am said to be one of the best, I have lost all belief in myself.

I have the presumption I am more of an appreciator than a creator now. And my art is no longer good to me…’

‘But why- that was the true question?’

‘Why would you turn your back on a gift like that?’

I asked my first question, I asked in her head where she unambiguously thought she had lost her mind, even though I have all control.

I mean, it is a gift, right? There’s no way it can be an immortal thing since we’ve all seen what happens when I try to paint.’

She leers- lost in her on the thought that was no longer hers, leading me across the room and discontinuing before a magnificent rendition called her parents, and she was no longer yours truly.

Contemplation searching every square inch of the canvas when she says, justly?

Influential with a feeling of supremacy does not even begin to

describe how I feel with a brush in my hand, blank canvas before me, and a full palette of paint by my side. Though Naddalin. And Melisa agreed unanimously to that thought.

(Time to go home)

For many years I have been invincible, shear to the elixir sought by all men, and not able to take it down easily!’ And that is what I would call the dad, after settling in for the night.

My thought was going through her ha- hum routines he was, old fished- and strict and wanting far too much for his child, also making her feel

the worthless feeling of losing out on the joys of life.

She shakes her head, shamed and lying naked on the floor, she gets shuffling to the door under only my power of movement for her.

I knew this all too well also… she was my new mission.

While Nevaeh was playing GOD.

~*~

‘And yet nothing can rival the farfetched rush the act of creation brings, even now it’s a rush of feeling

guilty. Of crafting something you just know is meant to be great for all time, and a moment that should be so different, always the same with me- and now her too.'

'I understand her life and I only been here a day, it's all the same, all girls know when life take yours.'

Portion

I- Naddalin, like had even a deeper thought that was locked out from her mind, and was haunting in just mine, I remember when my dad was talking about me becoming a woman- as a little girl still to him, and

what that meant and what you had to do, and that it was nicer if you save it for the right man- and marriage, and I was an only 12-year-old girl; then it was creepy now it awe-sticking to see it in return, to appreciate what he meant to me. ‘Honey, odd to me in its wonder, (head shaking side to side) hum- soon you’ll be a mother.’

‘Yet that never happened… he never got it, and neither did I.’

She turns toward me, hand at my cheek, and he kissed saying, ‘you always be mine- my something special and my always little girl.’

(Snapping out of it)

Then my cat ran and then jumped up on me on my lap, she was all I brought back with me from my world to her, was my cute little fuzzy- pussy-kitty cat named Valentine, that what all girls need when feeling low, I remember my kitty- so-o. The cat hides my true body within her.

‘Or at least that’s what I believed up until I saw you. Because seeing you for the very first time-’ She shakes her head, eyes gazing into mine. ‘Nothing can ever compare with that very first glimpse of our love.’

‘You didn’t stop painting for me- why did you?’

I held my breath- only slightly, hoping I was not the cause of her artistic demise, yet I had the thought that I was.

She shakes her head, gazes returning to the painting before her, that she was working on after many mounts of suppression and deepening thoughts, as her thoughts travel- to me in a link that is faster than light, a long way away- I add my feeling in to.

‘It had nothing to do- and no friends, and it all over you- she said on

the inside and then out- so we all felt the blame.’

The spiritual panting was dark, ethereal, otherworldly, ethereal spectral, wraithlike, and unearthly showing a girl angel, that was cover in blood, in a black and gray world.

Naddalin as Melisa- saying in a voice that is the same yet slightly hinting with hers, yet undetectable ‘this is a self-portrait, showing what is inside of me coming out, don’t you all see, that this is not madness this me being controlled.’

‘Little did she know- it was my hand, that painted it!’

‘And those things in this world we cannot explain come for us within them lingering. It’s just- well- at some point, the reality of my situation set in, that I was part of her and she- me and there was nothing she could do about it I owned her.’

As Melisa's dad- I squint, having no idea what that means, or what she could conceivably- be getting at.

‘A cruel reality I probably should’ve shared with you before.’ She sighs, looking at me.

I gaze at her, stomach filling with dread, unsure I want to hear the answer when I ask- in her thoughts only, ‘What do you mean, she asked?’ Not understanding what the thought meant.

Sensing from the look in her eyes just how much she is struggling with- the wonders.

There is no way I was going to kill her to take her back with me now… death was not the way out for this girl.

‘Hum what to do?’ I thought to myself and myself only.

‘The reality of living forever, aren’t they’ she says, eyes dark, sad, focused on mine, lost in my thought as if she knows I am there by now.

‘A reality that seems incredibly vast, infinite, and powerful, your part of aren’t you, with no limits in sight- until you realize the truth lurking behind it, is that death is the only way to get there, the truth of watching your friends, all leave you, it’s all you in my head making this happen, it all you… all wither and die while you stay the

same, and all the storms end and you in a way play destiny, making the changing patterns.

Only you are involuntary to watch it from afar like, because once the discrimination becomes obvious, you've no choice but to move on, to go somewhere new and start over again- or to end. And again. And again- start and end.'

Naveah- The oddest thing, even in my new-found love of power, overall, there was one thing I still never found, and that was my first boyish love- Chiaz, and to this day I do not even

have a picture of him, he only lives in my memory. He was in whole other leaves of our world, higher than I will ever be again.

Nevaeh- then at that moment shakes her head, letting the thoughts go, week feeling now than ever, even as the strongest she has ever been in her world.

All of which makes it impossible to kindle any real bonds. Yet she was making a friend in her head she knew it and someday maybe even more…

Then the caustic thing is, notwithstanding our limitless access to powers and magic, the lure to make a significant impact or consequence any real change is something that must be evaded at all costs. It is the only way to remain hidden, with our secrets unbroken.

~*~

Chiaz- ‘Since-’ I cajole, wishing she would stop being so puzzling and just get to the point, that she has completely lost her damn mind.

She makes me so nervous when she starts talking like that, I remember

this in the past, I just thought that it was the same things happening then as I do now.

‘Because drawing that kind of attention guarantees that your name and image will be recorded in history, something of which we must work to avoid. Only if you remember as the girl who went mad.’

‘Because while everyone around you will grow old and die, Haven, Emmah, Jaylynn, and so on, and yes, even Kristen, too- and you will stay the same, if you do not lose your mind, and let them in…’ Said Chiaz, also.

Entirely unchanged, you are in your looks completely the same girl you were when I met you all those years back, still takes my breath away, and I still LOVE you! And can't… until this day over them… no more… NO MORE I SAY.'

And, trust me, it does not take long before people start to notice how you have not changed a bit since the day you first met. We cannot run the risk of being recognized fifty years from now by a seventy-year-Old Haven. Can't afford the risk of having our secret revealed.'

Nevaeh- He then grabs hold of my wrists, gazing at me with such intensity, I feel the weight of his longing, and in a way, it takes me back to that time as if I snapped out it.

Chiaz- Besides, like always, when she is troubled, my only wish is to show I always cared- and was understanding to her cerebral intellectual sickness, and always realized that she was just a mad genius.

Portion

‘Can you even begin to imagine if Jaylynn, or Haven, or Emmah discovered the truth about us? Can you

imagine what they would think, what they would say, what they would do? That is why people like Naddalin and Haven are so dangerous to you and your mind- they exhibit what they are, and you completely ignoring the ordinary order of things, and subjecting your- own realities.' Said Chiaz.

'Make no mistake, ever,' is what I must deal with, you of all should know that. Said Nevaeh.

'The cycle of life is there for a reason, and you cannot change that, even if you cannot adept, let it go, let it go!' That is what he said to me.

‘That is where you’re wrong, so wrong, and while I may have sneered at that in my youth, feeling quite full of myself for rising above it, I no longer do.’ Held Nevaeh.

Besides, in the end, there is no fighting it. Whether you reawaken like our friends or remain the same as us, you are just a lost soul in lost time, your vibes, karma, atmosphere, aura, ambiance, and feeling will always catch up in the end as they did, why because you are different than them, you are higher your better.

Chiaz- ‘And now that I’ve experienced both higher and lower levels of this world, I will come down here to stay with you if you say you give up this madness.’

‘No.’ Is all she said.

‘I’m even more convinced that life as fauna envisioned it, is the only way, and I have to be there to oversee it all- understand.’

‘Go back I say… and you don’t love me, do you?’

‘But- if that is what you believe- then- believe it, where does that leave

us, enemies? …And if you think that your nuts.’

I ask, a chill encasing my skin, despite the warmth of her hands, at this point saying it is over, it was over many years ago when he passed before me.

‘I callous, to hear you say it, we should lay low, and just live for ourselves, rather than using our farfetched supremacies for any real change, should we not?’ he said sarcastically.

-And-

‘Besides how can that perchance- help your karma if you don’t use your gifts to help others? She said, "Now I ask why you are there, and I am here, just like everything else I fail to understand.’

She then adds a moment’s letter- ‘Exclusively if you do so incognito?’

Thinking of Haven and my hopes of helping her, thinking about this one and that one is why you are here, look at you and did you help them?

‘How dare you- HOW DARE YOU- COME INTO MY PLACE, and say that? What gives you the right?’

Even so, before I can finish, Naddalin’s already shaking her head, looking at me when she says, ‘Where does that leave us? Precisely where we are?’

She makes a gesticulation… in a shocking fashion.

‘Forever, together...’

‘So-o, as long as we’re actual, incredibly careful and continue to wear

our charms, that is, you feel that you’re immortal.’ Said Chiaz.

‘Above and beyond as for using our powers, we all can do that, why you, why do you feel as if you’re the chosen one?’ He said moments later.

Chiaz- Well, I am fearful it is much more byzantine than simply righting all wrongs, isn’t it?

While we may magistrate things as good or bad, the feeling of right and wrong does not. It is a simple case of like gets like, the final balancing act, nothing more, nothing less.

Beyond all that, like- if you are strong-minded to fix every situation you deem as bad, or difficult, or somehow disagreeable, then you rob the person of their chance to fix it, learn from it, or even grow from it, and the same with you. You are taking your time in the afterlife, to change others, when it is not up to you to make life-changing decisions.

-And-

‘No matter how painful, everything happens for a reason,’ your words not mine.

A reason you or I may not be able to grasp at first sight, over may be looking too hard or not at all, also your words, not without knowing a person's entire life story-their snowballing past. It also sounds like you, or the old you.

'Well, the old me can't talk to you…,' said Nevaeh.

'Why not?' asked Chiaz.

'Well… …?... She's dead!'

Portion

Chiaz- 'Besides to just rush in and interfere, no matter how kindly, would be like robbing them of their

journey. Moderately that's better not done right?'

'So-o, let me get straight.' An edge creeping into my voice I do not try to hide. 'Haven comes to me and says; my cat is dying; would you spare her life? And Nevaeh places her hands on the cat and in a surge of energy sparks flew from her palms, and a renewed life is given to what is now a kitten.

'Christ, it's a freaking miracle it's magical,' said Haven.

'I have become the Christ of our world, I am God.' Said Nevaeh in a rowing way.

‘You have lost your mind.’ He said to me in my face, so close I could smell the breath.

‘Oh, just say the only reasons why you loved me was for my tight little puss- and ass slam fitting perfectly into your lap, during, I may look fourteen, yet I not fourteen anymore, and sex is not- love.’

‘Say it, Chiaz, say it I am right, I know that I am…’

‘Look and you think you’re so divine now, you have had all your past teachers sent to a firing squad- and a bloodbath of them being executed at

POINT BLANK RANG sight in the front of the head.’

Then he went on to say…

‘I am not going to say that we loved each other, didn’t we?’ He spoke.

‘That was then, and this is now, and this is life or final death.’ She spoke.

As well even though I am undisputable I can fix it, I do not because it would result in too many inquiries, that I could never- ever explain and draw undue doubt.

‘Okay, I get it, I will go yet this is the last time you’ll ever see me, remember that.’ He said, ‘along with remembering the fact you don’t like to live with guilt, so think again before you turn me away.’

Then he went on to say muttering out the doorway, ‘Really and you’re the girl that thought the devil lived in her vagina as a child… and you’re the smart one and the master of all.’

‘I don’t like it, but I get it, you may be right- you just may.’ She said with a one-sided smile.

Nevaeh said, (ash to ash dust to dust) and Chiaz at once spontaneously combusted into flames- and was left to be nothing but dust, he never got away- with what he said to her did he?

‘He doesn’t even have wings yet, not much of a man, is he? Not even those of Heavenly, week, and pathetic.’ A tear ran down her cheek, and she turned around to go back to be behind her large desk and oversized chair.

There was caring yet no love.

Portion

(Naddalin as Melisa)

But when she says, my parents might be divorcing- she finally got her grips back in her mind talking me down, I might have to move- she thought in my mind that was also her linked together, and it feels like my entire world is yielding in telling me the with no inkling whatsoever that I’m in a perfect position to help her- I was unable, to maybe even converse some of those things by taking over her mind, body, and soul- yet, I have the rights to go with- still- I don’t know if I choose to be wise.’

I shrug for her inside, her body lost inside like a cold winter's night, feeling unfulfilled now and more than angry.

‘But anyway, my point is, something like that happens to our good friend and you’re telling me I can’t help?

‘I want her to stay alive as long as possible even if the mission is to take her life…’

That gave me three things I could do.

- As they want me to, take her back down with me to the castle, to be with all the other girls like her.

- Stay in her body even though her soul is mine, lost and lingering, to do the above when I feel ready.

- Or keep her alive… and be a friend as much as possible to her, and NOT be a fraud and a phony, like her- and them and even they too.

Because it would confuse her voyage or her ambiance, or whatever to take her when is not the matter? Said

Naddalin- in the body of this young sweet innocent young lady.

I mean, explain to me how that helps my ambiance, of what I am, by keeping the things to myself, after all, it is her life and I am not God and don’t plan on playing pretend like some- and we all know who she is, and why I don’t want to be like her any longer.’ I advise myself to not get involved over the fact of that,’ she says muttering to herself in inchoateness'.

(Back)

(Sad times back home, reports coming in of revaluation in France.)

1

2042- When I woke up it was cold like the haunting type of day with low light and the feeling of fog. The other side of the bed is cold like me inside and this world that I live in. Her fingers spring out, and then tighten, seeking Melisa temperateness, LIKEWISE, finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress, I am there by her side she is afraid, that she is going to be the one, the one that is chosen to combat.

‘It was a yearning to burn, all the books all that was wisdom, all that

was history, art, love, religion, and even sex was now questioned- at direct gunpoint.'

The computers and robots 'impressions' of life have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I pad,' and PCs, without looking through old dusty pages, plus its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unprotected sex.'

Like me she was thinking about how she might be the one girl in our

town, that must give her freedom up to fight in this war, like all of us girl in our bunker, a girl school if you well, we all are having this like bad dream all the same dream how does that work? No mom's or dad's no boys, so not cool for a girl that is a pre-teen yet want to feel what love is- we were all ripped away for how we are the girls with the stars on our arms, and known by a number.

Unquestionably, she did- thinking she would be the one called out to do this task, yet so did I- like so did all of us. This is the day of the acquiring of being a woman of my type,

a girl that is not what is called the right race. Were we having to go down in our numbers of what is not Permitted to the trooper's want and that man that has power over us all?

She pulls the covers back over and I am now in the same bed with her not allowed yet she is my little sister… what are they going to do, drag me out of the room and put a gun in my hand and kill me like they did my other older sister, last night? Just kill me, and get it over with… to I said, I live in a room with 100 girls, where you can even shit without a man or them looking at you

are doing just that, sleeping with one open, to say the least… I must which what I say now, or… (You are not prompted to say what go one within the walls.)

The voice in the air said. I fart they could kill me for that also! I want to see hare for the last time before we are off… before the round is chosen. I am here to see the look in her eyes of bloody fear, as she is me… we all feel this way… for the next day. She hugs me knowing that is safe.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There is enough light in the bedroom to

see them. My little sister, Melisa curled up on her little side she is no more they four feet, brown hair green eyes, sheltered under the privacy of the covers, nervous body and nightgown were there that was all we had on all that is allowed at night, short and loose-fitting.

The left side of her face forced to my chest some of it showing yet I did not care, you stop caring about that with a girl doing what she next to us, you are going to die anyway why not have your fantasy lover in your head.

Hugged tighter- and tighter together, before don where we are going to be ripped apart for what we may not know- being forever. She is now asleep, not me- she looks like me- LIKEWISE, younger, the brown hair is what they odium about she and I. Look at us worn LIKEWISE, not so beaten-down, me more than her… for I am older, I think. My sister's face is as rosé as raindrops fall hard out the windows with the bars being all the keeps the cold out, as lovely as my sister- rose- for which she was named- on a day like this when she was born.

My mother was incredibly beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me… (You can say that I

hear the voice say out yet this time it was in my mind, they have found a way to do that too.)

2

She wakes up to go pee, and they would not let her, so she goes off on the floor by the bed, she could be killed for that… I say she going to go… you can stop her. Now she is sitting on her knees, yet I am guarding her like I am the world to her and the other way around. Pulverized-in muzzle up faces

her lips like touching mine her nose on mine, wimping in her ear I was saying- words that would help or so I thought- missing was her mom- someone that was killed in front of her eyes seven days years ago, eyes color faded like when you lose a life and pass on, she had that feeling, I am sure of that fact.

She was talking about being a kid, and what that was like before all this bull shit happened. Melisa named her Punches, maintaining that she black, brown, and white like a coat that I have that is full of holes, she was

bright and blooming like a bright flower in spring at home, in France.

That cat dislikes me, yet I do not mind her, or at least distrusts me, that something I have felt a lot in my life, not being liked. Unlike my sister, even though it was years ago, he still remembers how I tried to drown her in a pot for something to eat. We were that poor thinks to the troopers, that took all that we were and were away from us.

And even then, my sister still loved me- she knew I was doing what I had to. I recall when she brought him

home, as a pet and not something that was food on the table- hell we did not even have that… Just a kitten, belly puffy with maggots, crawling with fleas.

The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. Likewise, Melisa begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay, even the maggot off cats… and so well she- I have even eaten the occasional rat run up my leg in my bed- raw.

Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed LIKEWISE, Teacup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me. The hair on my legs keeps us girl worm- looks

good now to be all hair? No hissing… I well bit you back and not even think about it… I loved cats, LIKEWISE, food is food. I feel one day, I will come upon a loved one of mine motionless against a wall or lying in the Grazing land, you hear the wails from a house, and the X armed forces are called in to repossess the body. Malnourishment is never the cause of death officially. It is always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia.

Likewise, then again that fools no one… Starvation Is not particularly rare of fate in these parts of 14. Who has not seen the dupes? Older people

who cannot work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines are left on the mud outside the shaft to pass on. Struggling through the streets, are ended with warfare.

3

This is the gigantic chamber we will ever come to love, for the love of die is less painful than living in the camp. I swing my legs off the bed reaching for my issued boots. Lithe leather that has molded to my feet. I pull on trousers, a dress, tuck my hair up and out, my long 2 drown braid

down my chest, and grab my silage bag. I was asked to do what I must, so we last until were called out- I think back on days that pass- On the table before it was blown up- under a wooden bowl to protect it from hungry rats and cats alike, sits a perfect little rabbit shit balls wrapped in rosemary leaves.

Melisa gift to me on earning a day. I put the cheese carefully in my pocket as I slipped outside, which was on the rat tarp hoping not to snap it down on my middle finger, and I need that as a girl- you know.

4

My father had been killed in the mine accident three months earlier in the bitterest February anyone could remember this if they wanted- LIKEWISE, they do not care. The numbness of his loss had passed, and the pain would hit me out of nowhere, photocopying me over, racking my body with sobs. Where are you? I would cry out in my mind all the time- it was harder for her being so young. My mom was lost in space for days after… not saying anything to anyone… or us so Melisa and I were taking care of

ourselves. When all she did was lay in bed with vibrations pulsating going on, her thoughts they said were with him.

The Borough had given us a small amount of money as compensation for his death, enough to cover one month of grieving at which time my mother would be expected to get a job. Only she did not. She did not do anything LIKEWISE, sitting propped up in a chair or, more often, huddled under the blankets on her bed, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Occasionally, she would stir, get up as if moved by some urgent purpose, only

to then collapse back into stillness. No amount of pleading from My sister seemed to affect her.

Our part of region 14, nicknamed the purlieu, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. People with bent over shoulders, swollen knuckles, and skinned backs and knees, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces.

Nonetheless today the gloomy streets are empty and barren. Shutters

are a brown window, row homes on the squat, and now graying color houses closed shop underneath. The earning of who is chosen are not until five P.M. May as well sleep on the only day now being here where we were allowed to do as we wanted, a reward they called for knowing that we are brave enough today for our area.

Mom is only nineteen… just so you know, we all have kids young… for some man take us as there's. It is just how it works here. I have already been had. Yet my dad killed him for this…

there is no law saying you can or cannot.

5

Our house is at the edge of the Ridge. I only must pass a few towns to reach the unkempt field called the Grazing Lands. Separating the Grazing land from the woods that are all burnt for the warfare, in fact circling all of quarter 14, is a high wood fence topped with barbed-wire loops. In theory, it is supposed to be electrified twenty-four hours with which man on towers, train dropping off more girls, girls-only here and man that wants us to be dead, a

day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods- packs of wild dogs want to lick and bit at are hills- streets are like infertile.

Even so, I always take a moment to listen carefully for the hum that means the fence is live, I sometimes try to see the boys' side, over there if I can, some of us girl try to run the face, there are ways. Right now, it is silent as a stone and some of us went for it, all we could do is be killed- so what- I do not want to die a virgin. Hidden by a clump of bushes, we dash, I flatten out on my belly and

slide under a two-foot stretch that has been loose by the time before.

There are several other weak spots in the fence that have been penetrated, LIKEWISE, this one is so close, out of the bathroom showers where the girls made a way out, I always enter the woods here, not caring if I have anything on or not.

6

We girls clam trees, to see if we can see into the boys' rooms, and then they give us a wavy saying it all clear and we make the run for it, sometimes- I feel like why they risk

their lives for us- just once, a girl just needs it in more.

I re-claim a bow, which I have made to fight them off me, I had it headend, so if I take on fire, I have something to send back, behind hollow log we wait it out. The Electrified fence in the way or not we were getting there and getting a boy tonight- it was the last time we might, the fence has been up-and-coming at keeping the carnivores out of quarters of 14.

Inside the timbers, they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals,

and no real paths to follow of deer and bear. The boys also give us the thing we need other than love at night- food is an important thing for where we are as thin as could be.

Good, my sister had to suck on my nipple just for something to eat… that how sad things are here… were not allowed to have a baby, mine killed the day I came here when I was kicked in the gut, saying we do not need any more of your kind. It was for nine months.

Look at that place over there- like E-block no running water just a

trickle, out of a hand pump no lights-nothing LIKEWISE, your thoughts of the girls on the other side, and betting it is their life, and working as slaves for the troopers. Then again there's also food if you know how to find it.

My father knew this was all going to happen, I recall them rushing in, we were in the addict with a trap door, I flashback about how he taught me some before he was blown to bits by a pistol go at his hand in a bang. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then and still am. Five years later, I still woke up screaming for him to run.

So- my sister is ten, I worry if a ten-year-old could fight till death in this war as a young girl, and then I look at me and know; I am not as strong. I keep having been feeling that she or I would be called out and I do not know why- like, it is my destiny- to be the-chosen one.

7

Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and I could be slaughtered and eat for it I do not care, and poaching carries the severest of consequences, more people would jeopardize it if they had weapons.

Nonetheless, most are not bold enough to venture out with just a homemade knife, I made mine for a food tray the tray they give you only once a day with roadkill on it. The water they give is the color of piss… some say they would eat their shit- I would not go that far, LIKEWISE, crazy will get to you.

My bow is an infrequency as I go under the wall, tagged along with a few other body parts- few others keep well hidden in the woods as I am the first to make the running leaps over all the traps and snags, carefully wrapped

in waterproof covers. Only 10 of us girls made this run, there were so many that just stayed in the spacious room and playing with themselves- why? You are going to die anyway.

Why?

Why- not make this last run for food and sex and a way out of this all. If a boy can buy you out in a mirage. My father could have made good money selling us to a man or husband, yet it is common for us girls to be a tramp at our age if mommy and daddy have the bucks to do it. No gold band just someone that takes you for a

possession… something to beat on and beat off on, they are playing thing… I feel.

On the other hand, if the troopers found out I was doing this like all these girls, like Alijah, Jania, Samee, Martah, Trace, and Majia- and so on… the other four I hardly know other- then seeing the nude in their bad and the shower rooms, or eating their rations next to me… I would have been publicly executed for rabblerousing at this point I feel too; I am the girl her with gut or so the others say.

My sister is the shy one of us all not even gone through the woman change is not bleeding if you do not get that, I just started like a week ago- that would not even kill a cockroach to eat it, I had to do that for her too, yet she is young sweet and innocent.

Most of the armed forces ignore the few of us who are hunting to give to them or the whole group, for this is what they want, us to fight for it so they do not have to kill, so they can kill us for doing what they want.

Confusing? Nope- not to them… Because they are as hungry for

fresh meat as anybody else is where what they want and what we want in not another human life to be killed yet they do. They are among our best trades- us- killing for the hell of it like a sick twisted sport- see the mass graves and the body braining like all the books. Then the idea that someone might be arming the ridge would never have been allowed.

All that was wisdom was dejected and seen as not to be useful in our lives, it has been a band. There are a lot of things that are forbidden to me, yet that does not stop me from doing it

anyway- unlike my reluctant sister that fears everything and everybody.

8

In the fall, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to harvest apples, us girls climbing trees. Nevertheless- always in sight of the Grazing land with the eyes of at least one trooper looking up at the dress, you get what I am saying there never not there. Always close enough to run back to the safety of neighborhood 14 if distress arises.

‘Areas of fourteen.’ Where you can starve to death in safety,’ I mumble out yet I was the only one to hear or so

I thought when the girl next to me was rolling her eyes. Then I glance over my shoulder, and she was like up my LIKEWISE, even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you, she said not wanting me to say a word.

The number on her jacket (G-S- 08976457544) was shining now in the spotlight of the guards' tower, we are going to get in trouble she said, as we were crawling to the boys' room. G for girl S for the star and the number ID.

Where are the star girls… that what they all call us here?

They all no were out I hear the click of the guns; it is just target practice for them just a hunt, they want us to do this!

9

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death that I would look out for my sister, the things I would blurt out about Area 14, about the people who rule our country, Paris was overrun and now there are 15 parts, from the remote city called the Capital up to us the little-unsolicited parts.

Eventually, I understood this would only lead us to more trouble, doing this so we went in and out fast with more than just a kiss- I had my I on Blazie, I was going to have this one thing- before I was axed off with my head. So-o I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts. On the other hand, unlike my sister, I do say way too much.

(Back)

Do my work quietly in school, was my life before this place, and being

ripped out of reality. Make only polite small talk in the public market that was my sister, not me. You can see us all there in this one-room schoolhouse. She is a good girl, not me- I deliberate little more than trades in the hot plate at my desk, the bell rings out free to go- to the market where I make most of my money giving up my food for the day.

Even at home there is nothing, I have on a long white T-shirt ripped up showing all my one side that was dads, that I wear as my dress, where I am less pleasant, I avoid discussing tricky

topics. Like the reaping, or food shortages, or the war kill. Melisa might begin to repeat my words, she looks up to me for everything, where would she be without me behind her? They know this they all do…

I wear this all the time even in the rain, where you can see it all, yet no one care about, that when all they want to do is live on another day sex is not something we care about when kids are run around naked- like a tribe around a fire wild looking like revenues animals with a look in their eyes for the test of blood.

10

By the sight of him waiting there brings on a smile to my face until he is shot right in front of me and all of us girl run back to are badly scared, and in far that we were seen, some girl still doing their thing… they ask question seeming at white looks on our faces, one looked at me I said I never smile except in the when I see him know I will never- I was in love with that boy. It was not like I wanted to be held or anything LIKEWISE, she could attest to taking her hand off it to feel my pain.

No, her boy was in her hand only- that what I will have to do now- hers was killed off the night before. Killing is the sport they love, and I hate it!

My real name is Emalie, LIKEWISE, that not what I remember as just a number is all; I had barely whispered it and they say you are only allowed to give out your number to outsiders. So-o I thought what they going to kill me for this little thing I think not- so.

(Back)

Of on the hunt- ‘Look what I shot, I said to my sister too young to have a gun-’ she holds up a loaf of bread with the burl stuck in it, and I laugh hard. It is real bakery bread. How did she get that? Not the flat, dense loaves we make from our grain provisions.

She never said how she got it yet I had my thought about it, as a boy gave it to her, which made it to her bedside… at home. I take it in my hands and we share it, pull it to bits, and hold the wound in the crust to my nose, inhaling the fragrance that makes

my mouth flood with drool. Fine bread like this is for special junctures. The boys have more for they are boys' worth something, unlike girls that have no value other than that of passing on this race they do not want.

‘Mum, still warm,’ I say. She must have been at the bakery at dawn with some run-away boy to trade for it, she gives him a kiss and a hug and her body she will it whatever she wants. For that is all girls are good for in these municipalities- ‘What did it cost you?’ I asked- Just the kiss good night. I giggle

think sure- I know- yet it was food, right?

‘Well, we all feel a little closer today, don’t we as we all look at the family for what may be the last time?’ I say fast, not even bothering to roll my eyes. ‘Melisa left us cheese on the traps saying this as a joke.’ I pulled it out. ‘We also shared a cuddly squirrel- I got the ass. Think the old man was feeling sentimental this morning,’ says that he would stay with us and not work for the day- there are just sealing shafts off- no money in that for them to take so why did it he felt.

‘Even wished me luck.’ I look at the blue star glowing etched into my skin on my arm. Like the Blue Bird nickels, that I will certainly not-interminably give up.

11

Her expression brightens at the treat as I hug her for what I thought the last time. ‘Thank you, I said to her for being in my life. We’ll have a real feast to more before we are either executed in a line or have to fight for life as the chosen girls to keep our race going- they did as some not all.’

There we all are all ganged up in rows, like little toy soldiers we fall in these lines it was what was said for us to do in our thinking, as we all march into a Bureau agent our well or life, accent as she mimics

Effie Trinket, the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives once a year to read out the names at the jumping.

‘I almost disremembered! Blissful Starvation Stars!’ Her determination a few blueberries from the bushes around us.

‘Besides- May you’re yearning for the balances of life always be in

your erranding.’ The confetti go off… as we await our fate, yet she the right bitch well live on for the rest of her days, yet we with the state may not… just for being not… what they want us to be… who are they? The backs were all murder in front of us, so we could see what be in this battle coming up. They are not good enough to scrub the fools are troopers say giggling amongst themselves. There well one is one black girl and one black boy fight in this upcoming event. They want less… us too…

The sweet from fingers going down my hand’s sourness detonates across my tongue.’ I no-win situation it in my mouth, as well as break the delicate skin with my teeth biting my nails. May you’re yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding!’

I arrived in my mind like us all that are made to think is what must be- with equal verve… we must put on it for the reason, that the unconventional is to be scared out of your intelligence. As well, the Bureau pronunciation is so la-di-da, anything sounds funny in it,

and I look for her and see her knees are even knocking as she looks frightened. Like a lost little girl on her way to school in the dark mooring woods.

I watch as the woman we call Miss. Lorde Dio pulls names, with her hand.

Straight black hair, olive skin, gray eyes she is the head of the girls or so were tooled.

Likewise, we are not related any- of the star girls are the mix of them that is why we are being killed, burnt, and gassed, at least not closely. It was that moment of the families

never to be also once again, we are living in are yarning would change for their wants, for those that worked would go on without their kids, like my dad who works the mines resemble one another this way. Were one if not both of his offspring would die in this event.

That is why my mother and Melisa, with their light hair, braided and have bright haunting spooky-looking blue eyes, always look out of place in all the others, not something common. They are… amazing to me… My mother’s parents were part of the small Kidd’s class that outfits to

troopers. X armed forces, and the occasional Ridge purchaser. They ran an apothecary shop in the nicer part of Area 14. Since almost no one can afford doctors or an RN, apothecaries are our healers or crunch heelers. My father got to know my mother, for they were in the same groping she was not all X you see, she was upper in her class for part 2.

She was banished from her mom and dad doing this and having kids not married. She is like one present of us- comparable to what is in his bloodline. She must have loved him

to leave her home for the Ridge. Because on her hunts she would occasionally collect medicinal herbs, Melisa is good with her hands, even the boys say that when we were all together living free, to a point, and sell those to her shop to be brewed into medications.

All she ever wanted was a lover and she has even tool me what was in her romantic dreams, like walking through them, with her, their race. Loads of kissing, fleshly playing, and lusting! I never had anything like that… thus far I want to. I try to evoke that

when all I can see is the lady who sat by, blank and out-of-the-way, while her children turned to the skin, bones, and rot. I try to excuse her for my father's wishes. Nevertheless, to be truthful, I am not the merciful type, like my sister.

My sister's day in the days before this- bathing in a tub of warm water waits for me. and I scrub off her off all the dirt, water hard to find so I would have to be in there with her, and to get all the sweat from the woods of all with all the grim, and even wash my hair and her which only happens once a week. Let us put your hair up, too,' she

says. I let her towel-dry it and two braids it up around their head back into a ponytail. I can hardly recognize myself in the cracked mirror that leans against the wall. To my surprise, my mother has laid out one of her lovely sundresses for me and one for her with soft pink matching shoes- new there were days where we did not have anything on is feet.

Plus, that was the same day they kicked down the doors and said- we belong to them. You look beautiful, she was not a little girl with this look. And nothing like myself,' I say. I hug

her because I know these next few hours will be terrible for her.

Her first reaping. She is about as safe as you can get since, she is only entered once. I would not let her take out any tesserae. Likewise, she is worried about me. That the unthinkable might happen. I protect Melisa in every way I can she knows that, LIKEWISE, then I am immobilized against the earning. The tormented I always feel when she is in pain or fearful, she balls up lags to her chest, and threatens to register the bad thoughts.

12

Nocked like in the rocks up and over.

Starting this place, we are invisible LIKEWISE, have a clear view of the valley over to the tower, which was is teeming with summer life even if we were regulated, the girl in summer was socking sunlight dance in the streets with fire- Higdon's blasting water.

The day’s war glorious before all hell was unleashed on my mind, with a blue sky like my sister’s eyes and a soft breeze like her hair tickling my face. There had never been anything

romantic between her and a boy until this last week, unlike me. And although he was only two years older, so I feel like it was harmless for what I would, and she would get out of it, he already looked like a man strong in all the places. It took a long time for us to even become friends, not for her she was swooning fast, to stop haggling over every trade and begin helping each other out.

When they produced a more efficient system that transported coal directly from the mines to the trains,

we got on to go to this place up at the capital.

Were up to now- where it is- tonight. After the earning, where everyone is supposed to celebrate and love to hate and love to die with fate. As well as a lot of people do, out of relief that their children have been spared for another year. Likewise, at least two families will pull their shutters, lock their doors, and try to figure out how they will survive the painful weeks to come.

13

At six o’clock, we head for the quadrangular. Presence is mandatory except you are on death’s back door. This evening, officials will come around and check to see if this is the case. If not, you will be imprisoned. People file in silently and sign in and go to their seats. The earning is an awesome occasion for the Bureau to track the population as well. Seven- through pre-teen year-olds are herded into roped areas marked off by ages, the oldest in the back, the young ones, like Melisa, toward the front.

Dad and mothers- and teens or family members line up around the boundary where they have to say or be shot on the spot and some are and there are cheers, holding tightly to one another’s hands.

Likewise, there are others, too, who have no one they love at stake, or who no longer care, who slip among the crowd, taking bets on the two kids whose names will be drawn. Balances are given on their ages we have too many we need to out the overloads, were tipping the scales- if you well, the

movie plays out about the story of how this all came to be…

These same people tend to be informers, and who has not broken the commandment laws? I could be shot daily for hunting, LIKEWISE, the appetites of those in charge protect me. Not everyone can claim the same. Whether they are Ridge or merchant if they will break down and weep. Most refuse to deal with the racketeers LIKEWISE, carefully, prudently. The pre-teen that is here is the one that has already done this and live to talk about

it, yet that does not stop them from killing you if you fight them also.

The four commandments of stars pre-teens:

1. A star person may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm unless it is given the order.

2. A star person must obey orders given by human trooper’s beings excluding orders that would conflict with the First Law.

3. A Star person must protect its existence if such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

4. No sex of any nature or style identified in the populations with same sex without given rights to pass on your race.

Yet in this tournament, all laws are off!

That is what makes this so much fun- no- Miss Lorde Dio said, sipping on her mixed drink.

As we walk, I notice Melisa's blouse has pulled out of her skirt in the

back again and force myself to stay calm. ‘Tuck your tail in, little girl to you look cute and all grown up,’ I say, smoothing the blouse back in place. I glance at the overall face in their whole school uniforms all unique to their parts in this parcel, yet the same with their LIKEWISE, tons on the one side how we all must be equal, still smoldering underneath his stony expression. Sitting next to each other at assemblies, partnering for sports activities.

We rarely chat, which suits-some just like us both simply fine to me

if you are or not- you must give it to get it- no? The girl is calling out once she is in my year at school. Being the mayor's daughter of all things- no one is excluded if you have some star in you, you expect her to be a snob, LIKEWISE, she is all right. She just keeps to herself. Like me. Yet she may have the cone to get her replaced with someone like me.

Melisa, this calling of all nights- her drab school outfit has been replaced by an expensive white dress, where the girl all must strip in front of us boy's girls everyone sees this, seeing

these girls all become what they are going to be when they change. Then her dark hair is done up with a pink ribbon by an older girl that has sieved the last war stars. Reaping clothes per- white show innocents- you have to tournament your colors and your place in this world. The boy forms the head down shaved… and made flawless… they say it the only time is a race would look worthy.

I read into my sister's thoughts- she was thinking about her boy- Does she mean it? I question- know they were hearing this too when a

thought like this was not Permitted. Or is she messing with him, for the love and lust? I am guessing the second. At the Bureau arena looking like the warrior playground in Roman times just art-deco- white glassy and modern, yet it is the 2040's.

His eyes land small on her I see the puppy love, circular pin at her before she took foot in her dress. Real silver LIKEWISE, tons and add-ons… Attractively crafted. 'What can you have other than your thoughts at this point when all you are in front of all of them, sure you're going to think? Five

entries? The interplanetary gets tighter, more enclosed as individuals reach. The square’s quite large, LIKEWISE, not enough to hold Area 14th populace of about ten thousand.

Stragglers are directed to the adjacent streets, where they can watch the event on screen as it is televised live by the state. I had six when I was just twelve years old.’

Her face becomes closed off and is looked drop like her eyes in shame when she was not a woman there was nothing to take off- the people giggled saying she still a baby.

The bets are on her is she is picked- that she would die fast, boys put the money on her to not last, just like they did with me and a girl named Illiah ‘Good fortune, I hear from the girl next to me- she said my this be in your erranding’s.’ ‘You, too,’ I say, and the door closed and the light change form intense when on our nude bodies change to now blue. Showing is the color of whom we are… and the color we are going to die for.

The rules of the Starvation Stars are simple. In chastisement for the revolt, each of the 15 Boroughs

must provide one girl and one boy, called LIKEWISE, to participate. The twenty-four try- LIKEWISE, will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last try LIKEWISE, standing wins.

14

The result was France, a shining Bureau ringed by thirteen Boroughs, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. Then became the dim days, the revolting of the

neighborhoods in contradiction of the Bureau and their principal.

15 were defeated for this out of all of us, yet this a yearly thing the other is just knocked off my well of the powers at be, the thirteenth obliterated. The Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace and, as our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be repeated, it gave us the Starvation Stars. I ask why not just kill us all and be done with it, they say what is the fun in that not seeing the pain and Starvation for life. Taking the kids from our Boroughs,

forcing them to kill one another while having no say at all.

This is the Bureau's way of reminding us how we are at their sympathy and lack of it. How little unplanned we would stand of enduring another revolt. To make it embarrassing- as well as torturous, the Bureau requires us to treat the Starvation Stars as an entertainment, a sporting event pitting every Borough against the others. The last honored guy alive receives a life of ease back home, and their Borough will be showered with- awards and the right to

pass on his spermatozoa and pop as many kids as he wanted with whatever preteen girl he wanted, consisting of food. All year, the Bureau will show the winning Borough gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation.

The mayor steps up to the platform and begins delivering... It is the same story every year. He tells of the history of us and is parts of France, the country that rose out of the ashes of and blood where every inch is covered. She lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the violating seas

that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance lingered. ‘Look how they take our children away and demean them like this naked, and afraid, they kill off babies like changing underwear, if there are twins one is killed off, and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every one of you. Just as we did in Borough Thirteen.’

Then she reads the list of past Neighborhood 14 victors. In 200 years, we have had exactly three. Only one is still alive and he stands before us for

two years back. A paunchy, young man -aged man, never a girl, that is the win for the girls this year to kick ass. A girl doing this they say is impossible. So…? What would you say as a girl? Are we that week and worthless? The crowd responds with its token applause, LIKEWISE, he is confused and tries to give Effie Trinket a big hug, which she barely manages to fend off.

Them- whatsoever words they use, the real message is clear we want to see you fight till death for us to see if you want to live on and pass your blood down, yet you will have to lose some.

‘Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every one of you. Just as we did in Neighborhood Thirteen.’

It is time for the drawing. Effie Trinket without the help of a hand- says as she always does, ‘Females first!’ and crosses to the goblet note with the girls’ names. She goes on a bit about what an honor it is to be here, while all and sundry knows she is just aching to get bumped up to a better Borough where they have proper victors, not drunks who molest you in front of the

entire nation. ‘LIKEWISE, then again there are still thousands of slips in here we see the name bingeing up on the wraparound walls,’ I wish I could whisper to her not to think- yet that not easy to do.

Through the crowd, I spot her looking back at me with a ghost of a smile. She reaches in, digs her hand deep into the note, and pulls out a slip of paper. The crowd draws in a collective breath and then you can hear a pin drop, and I am feeling nauseous and so desperately hoping that it is not me, that it is not me, that it is not me.

As earning go, this one at least has a slight entertainment factor. Likewise, suddenly I am thinking of her all the names 100 in that big glass droplet and how the balances are in your surroundings. Not compared to a lot of the boys.

And he is thinking the same thing about me because her face darkens, and she turns away. Like it was already said-

15

Someone was gripping my arm, a boy from Sam, and I started to fall, and he caught me. Now I feel her berth

in me like, like when I feel hard going down the steps trying to remember how to breathe, when I hit a window on wet concrete into and on a home and concerned back, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name bounces around the inside of my cranium.

And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt. Somewhere far away, I can hear the crowd murmuring

unhappily as they always do when a twelve-year-old gets chosen because no one thinks this is fair. It is this detail, the untucked blouse forming a ducktail, which brings me back to myself.

I screamed out Melisa was one slip of paper in thousands! There must have been some mistake here there must be. I wanted to replace her, yet I could not I would kill for doing that, that would have been rebelling and act that would see death to you for doing. I said in the same moments, know I should not- this cannot be happening… Her chances of being chosen so remote

to all of us yet the love the underdog and the week meek girl to do this, the taste of blood dripping down her vagina is what they want. And they are going to see that too, that I would not even bother to worry about her I know she going to pull through this not as innocent little girl LIKEWISE, come back as a crampon lady. She will be deflowered just trying to stay alive with all the boys that she needs to give her what she needs and that is food and warmth and housing with them. A girl is just not as strong as a boy that all say… Hadn't I done everything? On stage no- Melisa was singled out for her

age, and virginity- STRIP! NAKED! OR DIE! We all gasped, yet some said it has happened before to country LIKEWISE, I see her pink and white kiddie undies moving to down she is reluctant, yet must do this… I nor she does not have to worry about a boy popping vagina open, a toper already it with his finger ripping fixed she cray and it bloods out saying we cannot have you be a little girl.

He licks the blood off his finger with his lips snickering, she will always be remembered for this… and I was the one to take her.

16

Anywhere far away would-be nice sing this all happening, I can hear the crowd murmuring building up into an oh, happily as they always do when a ten-year-old girl gets deflowered in front of a crowd, gets preferred because no one thinks this is reasonable. As well as then I see her, the blood drained from her hands, face tightened in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt yet again I did

not say anything about it in my mind for her to hear.

‘Melisa!’ I do not need to shove through the crowd. The other kids make way proximately allowing me a straight path to the platform of the stage. I reach her just as she is about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me.’ Melisa!’ The strangled cry comes out of her throat, and I saw that her muscles begin to move again as I was giving her the stench, yet I knew soon that would change with the shout me out and off for her mind and thoughts with a

microchip in my arm the run to my mind using sound waves.

‘Lovely!’ says Effie Trinket. ‘LIKEWISE, then again I have faith in there’s a small matter of familiarizing the acquiring winner… There is some confusion on the stage, as all her mind chatting devices are ripped out of her body. The rule is that once a try LIKEWISE, the name has been pulled from the ball, another eligible boy if a boy’s name has been read, or girl if a girl’s name has been read, no one can move forward to take his or her place. In some Boroughs, I feel this would

want not to be so, yet that life here- in which winning the reaping is such a great honor, people are eager to risk their lives, the volunteering is complicated. Nonetheless, in Borough 14, where the word byline is equal to the word corpse, volunteers are all LIKEWISE, extinct.

Melisa is earsplitting shrieking boisterously in front of me. She runs off the stage, naked as the day she was born as her dress slips as she trips some. Not caring about anything other than me. She is wrapped in her skinny arms around me like a vice. ‘No! No!

You can’t go home with me; you have to go and maybe have a chance at winning- you could do this you know- I believe in you- remember that!’

I swallow this hard… ‘Melisa, let go or they well… No-’ I say harshly not wanting to be that way, because this is disconcerting me, and I don’t want to cry. When they televise the replay of the earning tonight, every person will make note of my tears or, they marked as an easy target for the gun team. Acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they

can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone it. All of this is wrong.

A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction. ‘Let go!’ I can feel someone pulling her from my back. I turn and see Gale has lifted My sister off the ground and she is thrashing in his arms. ‘Up you go, girl,’ I say, I hear the voice fighting off the crying to keep stable, and then she is carried off toward the back was a door open without a sound. I steel myself and climb the steps down to the hose with my mom’s head in my chest panicking.

(Back)

Just like my father, Melisa, who no one can help loving. Was the one that I say living out her life as a helper of others, not killing them, that is why she was chosen for this?

Then to some degree, unexpected happens. At least, I do not suppose it is because I do not think of area 14 as a place that cares about her. I have become someone precious to her and that was looking out for her, yet I cannot ever do that, in my heart I knew she was a goner. Yet I would not let her feel that I have the options.

It is an old and rarely used gesture of our area, sporadically seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love. Now I am truly in danger of crying, I know this… she is yet they what to see her fight to the death, for she was picked. Not allowed yet there giggling at her for this… I knew she would be strong- surprisingly strong for such a wreck. ‘Look at her… Look at this one! They were saying she is just a baby! Easy meat!’

They bring them all back out after they all cool down… like an

encore… All the names have been called out I could not even hear them like… it was not important.

All the boys and all the girls… they are all standing there all have their ways, and their personalities, yet none-stand out as much as she.

He cannot think of the word for a while- a man said- he releases me and starts for the front of the stage. He shouts, pointing directly into a camera. ‘I like her!’ His breath reeks of homemade whiskey, I have done run for him, and it has been a long time since he was bathed. I know how to be a boot

lager. Running at night only for it is illegal. Then he adds in the camera- ‘Boldness I would bang her LIKEWISE!’ He says triumphantly. ‘More than you any other girls up there or in this assembly, therefore the picked here- she’s pretty! - and that makes us want to fight for her battle.’

‘Lots in her dreaminess... he was…’ He is disgusting, LIKEWISE, I am grateful she was grossed out LIKEWISE, was think that was sweet even so... she too nice… some said. They then did an up-close shot of her with her hands laced her eyes dropped

chin tucked left, and wiggle- dancing with her arms V-ed inform of her hips to her shy ways. Camera gleefully trained and drop to her eyes, and they get the upshot blue eyes glittering- lips wet to her peal face- cheeks shift pink, and she looked up with her eyes rolled to the top head down still.

She was biting her lip on the left side, looking like she was doing the pee-pee dance like is she looks downward it would all go away. I put my hands behind my back and stared into the distance, and made a hand sing, that only she would get so she

would feel okay and safe. Eloy, the smallest of us all really- we asked where she came from, never growing in height since that age- she is 3 foot 8 inches- she is so small look five next to all these others that tower over her.

Even I tower over her at 5 feet.

17

Their numbers were clearer to me than their names…

All boys started with B- S- something…

All girls were G- S- something…

Long runs of numbers like a barcode…

Ezrah Everett- was the boy's name that was called out a boy that my sister played with for many years before this all happened, yet we are getting used to this, it is been going on now for ages, it is just now we have a new evil like a leader that wants massacres… it is not just because fight and die that was the old ways, now it just pops anyone of she wishes just with a smile and bat of an eye- there died.

The boy Ezra- Oh, no she said- starting to think about him as a love

interest- they read her thoughts I knew it I said, I think- this is sick- they want her to lose her boy crush or see what could be. Not him... she yelled- I have never spoken directly to this boy LIKEWISE, I feel close to him for how he looked and held her to him- in play or not there was a spark there. I watch him as he makes his way toward the stage. 6 feet five inches in height, solid build, coal-black hair that falls in waves over his almost hitting the back of his nick all combed back not too long yet not short. Big brown eyes that change gold in the sunlight.

There were no odds here in the name draw- it was the thought of these kids- and what they did not want to see happen. Their worst nightmare- would be-and then they do it to be prominent. Kill your crush for example and if you do not someone is going to. That the sport here- killing what you love. The shock of the moment is registering on his face was seeing her having the same look of hart hitting the floor and back up, you can see his struggle to remain emotionless with her loss in hope feeling as he had, LIKEWISE, his brown eyes show the terror like I have seen so often in prey on the hunt for

deer and others large or small tournament.

He is now a large tournament- a moving target- fun someone in the group does not just pop him off now- oh they cannot we all lost our gun to the government- Melisa got hers back just for this event only. All the troopers in blood red, black, and gray uniforms- they use our shit to kill us with- nice right- helpless are we. Yet that was the overturn that took place.

Here are her uniform blue and white… that has chevrons on the font also there is her logo- and nameplate,

and it shines in the light- with are cobalt color that fades into navy blues. They have already made up… each uniform shows their colors, from their parts- unique to their towns. With a symbol that is all, there is too. Melisa is the Blue Bird, with guns crisscrossed in the back. So-o they knew there was no randomness here or so they want us to think- I am not that dumb- some are though.

A uniform with nothing underneath where if she takes the top off, she is topless, no bras for to be far she does not need one- they find this

funny too, for these things wool, and you cannot sleep in that way, so the girl must run around in the nude, fun. It is all part of their sick tournament. Her hair will cover some yet not all over her chest… it all that they want to see. I am sure we will see it all before the stars are over. And say if a boy can do this a girl can- farness they call it was all the same… also, there was her stuff need- like them all-a medieval archery bow- in pink with pink aero- feathers which she made and sets her apart from the others…

A Winchester gun also pinks, with a white barrel and long sharp bayonets. All the old technology they said adds to guessing or waiting for what was next when you are loading and someone is running upon you, yet she is the fastest girl I have ever seen to load a shot. She has a Gut hook hunting knife, to cut necks with our hands and more.

A civil war sword, with a handguard that’s a plus on her end, she says one boy cut his handoff. I know not to shoot until I can see smell their breath on my face, and not to fire until

I see the color in their eye's balls. I am going to put this up to a hart and pull the trigger, I do not want too LIKEWISE, I have too.

Her dad’s gun passed down those fits in a holster on her belt. Single barrel pinfire pistol AKA thumb gun. Brass Knuckles if needed, and she will need them, a lot of this is a hand and kicking bloodbath. 100 areas and a purse with all the girl things she needs- like pads that all she wanted to be what they say is far to the other girls they made sure they all had the same, for others are crapping and she well to it is

all part of the tournament for the girls on the fight- the time is in control of this too in her mind, and ammunition.

In this tournament, you can see a girl do it all- like we see everything about her life when she comes in OHs in the night before sleeping or in the marring- shits and pisses too. It is what makes it entertaining, they say. I no Melisa- she sprays out six times, for the bath time. So, I wonder if she will, being shy? You are going to die anyway so why not… have some good feelings coming out of you… and so what- yet that is me not her… I am glued to the

wall screens in my small one-room homespun that gave to us. It is smaller than a teardrop taller, yet they say this is better all or old home were bulldozed over with all our crap inside, yet we have a screen that links to the troops.

They do not have cameras in our bathrooms or bedrooms for this fact, yet I wonder this too- for they know how sexual Melisa is with her own body, not public chat that she where kiddie undies, that she is pre-pubescent, that she does not have a bar yet. That she loves horses, and dolls, and matching thin strap- colorful

sundress, with her shoes, and fingernails. Doing her hair with soft waves and long brads, and playing outside, picking flowers in spring.

What would you do if someone were seeing you do all this, I mean you must do this right? I wonder if she will- get with him… before death?

The boy thinks about him- I know, I have seen them in the bakery, school and at my home, LIKEWISE, one is too old now to volunteer he is older for her like a teenager. This is standard, the Family devotion only goes

so far for most people on earning diurnal.

(Back)

Melisa- I was scared… ‘I suppose now that my mother was locked in some mysterious world of sadness lost in here crazies’.’ There was no choice, LIKEWISE, for me to understand… At so young- LIKEWISE, at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, LIKEWISE, a mother as well.

Zoie- AKA the girl talking to you- hi! It has become known that my mother is crazy now lost in this

madness… of being with my dad in her mind… that everyone looks down on us even more, and what they are- shit on a boot next to a doorstep. They longer care for us being a money pit on society. I grew up seeing those home kids at school, seeing them go up fast made of ply.

All white, in and out. No colors… not a worm at all so cold. A sweet, tiny girl who cried when I cried before she even knew the reason, who brushed at the sight of a boy, looking at her walking to school, who still wet the bed some nights, because for seeing my

dad beating on my mom for hitting it before the time was done or spending money.

He had hated her she loved him- yet he was good to us- the money goes to the kids not you for dumb shit- coal dust I tack in is not for you to blow- on dresses I need food- and the kids are starving- why. Let us just say the happy sexy time is all that keep them

cheerful to us even. Not a good matchup yet he wanted her when she was younger.

The sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders forward. I could never let that happen to Melisa. The community home would crush her like a bug. So- I kept our predicament a secret.

18

However, the money ran out and we were slowly starving to death. There is no other way to put it other then, I kept telling myself if I could only hold out, Melisa turns ten on the 14th and be able to sign up for the high leaves class at school, and a working

job with younger kids in the birthing rooms, that money went to me- I held it for her… I become a mom, I have the hunter's job… getting food and seeing that she has what she needs. I see that she is bathed, brushed her hair, and teeth, things like that. I clean her dress up and hang the line.

For three days, we had had nothing, LIKEWISE, boiled water with some old, dried mint leaves I had found in the back of a cupboard. Melisa- I remember the rain showers had waterlogged through my sister's lager coat, leaving me chilled to the bone. By

the time the market closed, I was there seeing if I could beg for money and food also playing the guitar, all blue fades into white, worn with gray shown some on the back and neck, it has a defeat tall paces, something I do not get… yet it a Gibson, it looks crappy yet sounds okay to me and most worm when the days are so cold and you must be by a barn burl to stay warm, I get an amp out of a dumpster by my home where this Gibson was too. Blue binding, I have my logo on the back with my number- my name, and my life story on it.

And that is the saying-

Love is foolish with the one you want to be what to not be- to some like me I must see, the tournament of warfare not far too careful, they see me fight, in their sight, day and night, is this right? The height of love is the death at the end that is lasting. I will be remembered like the bluebird in flight- see my tears as they dry- going high- either way like a rattle that does not matter: ‘Besides- my yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding. Nothing more nothing less.’

I was shaking so hard I dropped clothes in a mud puddle when I saw the firing line 100 man and 80 girl is all blast all at once babies too and little kids, they ran the was shot in the handgun above the nose, for not giving in… they form part 15 no longer a town at all. I did not pick it up for fear I would keel over and be unable to regain my feet. Besides, no one wanted those clothes. And then they would stop to reload their colts, and fire them empty one girl was naked, no more than three, and I saw her run and fall to a trooper.

I named her Laina. She had no name, just a number, I do not know what it was about her- LIKEWISE, I had to see she was remembered, yet like all the others she either went to the mass graves. Where I saw them just tossed her in like trash with all the other nude bodies young and old alike. I would most like to be eaten by something wild in the woods when this all goes down… I do not see why it any different than this- may be better. I wonder if I should just take the gun now and end it before it starts- only one thing stops me… and that is the faith of young adoration. OR I WOULD…! I have it here

at my temple- why not right? I try yet I cannot do this…

I cannot…

I cannot…

I cannot…

I squeeze my eyes thigh… I cannot… they taunt me too… in my mind look in my penitentiary sterol- like room awaiting my task the next day where I will have it all or so they say- I ask why to bother. They are cute about it to giving us things to end it before it-starts… to see if they can crack you. It is my last big meal- might as well rub it

in- fun- they know we are not going to eat- that we cannot hold it- yet we starved up to this point- yet that the point to play with us to Freak- with us. Thinking about the hell week to come- therefore…?

19

Melisa- I remember crawling into bed, and fell into a dreamless sleep, yet fearful all feeling like I was gun down or chased by someone. It did not occur to me until the next morning that the boy might have burned the bread on purpose. Might have released the loaves into the flames, knowing it

meant being punished, and then delivered them to me. The boy would glance my way all the time, LIKEWISE, I was watching him not letting him see that I was. Because of the bread, because of the red weal that stood out on his cheekbone. What had she hit him with? My dad never hit us, yet mom was the bitch. I could not even imagine if- she was that in more than one way. You get that…?

The boy took one look back to the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention back to bread in my direction. The second

quickly followed, he was in the room over the way they made sure we could see one another yet not be with each other beforehand- just part of the tournament they played, closing the kitchen door tightly behind him.

Zoie- I remember- I reached out to Melisa and she climbed on my lap when she was seven, her arms around my neck, and head on my shoulder. Like- she did when she was a toddler; like she did the night before.

I remember- my mother sits beside me and never hugs her arms around us. For a few minutes, we said

nothing. Then I start telling them all the things they must reminisce about doing now that I will not be there to do them for them. Yet for her news, she never really was… just so you know mom!

The take out's- when I am done with teachings about energy, and staying in school homework, and stop turning in o my mother. I calmed down for the night after seeing her off-

Thinking about the times- I would do not bother suggesting Melisa learn to hunt for I had never thought she would be the one. She has no

background in the killing, only seeing- I tried to teach her a couple of times and it was catastrophic- she feels on her LIKEWISE and got hurt- I said- no more. The sticks horrified her, and whenever I shot something, she would get teary, and talk about how cute it was not to do that- we must live I said. We might be able to heal it if we got it home soon enough- not understand it was not moving anymore- so I distillate on that too- like what is she going to do here? Lay- there and die…?

I must be a babysitter- I cannot cock out on the flames and leave Melisa

on her own to run free- I knew she would get lost like a puppy. There is no me now to keep you both alive if I do not do this and I am the only girl here too. It does not matter what happens- to her I would never forgive myself- whatever you see…

Parting words- You have to assure me you'll battle!' My voice a whisper not to draw attention- that she may not be the best one in the call outs. The fear I abandoned- felt was solid and vice versa. I pulled her arm from my grasp and moved out of the holding room. 'I was sick feeling; I could have

treated myself if I'd had the medicine- yet I can buy that stuff- you deal with it.' That is life- 'OH- JUST DEAL WITH IT!'

20

Clasping my hands to her face… holding in like- so tiny 'You have to take the fight and do- all that I do for you on your own you think you can do that- umm- hum- she whispered softly and thoughtfully- looking up at me towering over her, too. You are so fast and brave. You can win- you could you know- you could get this- do it for me. 'I've seen her carried off by them- the

troopers- kicking and screaming like a newborn. Suffering from immobilizing sadness since- I see her on the screens we all do like an animal- locked in the pound. It is a sickness of the kiss of death- the last kiss- to be given by me to her, LIKEWISE, it is one we cannot afford. Her- she was my world- my… everything- I cannot win said- Melisa- you must know that in her heart. The competition will be far beyond my abilities. Kids from wealthier Boroughs, where winning is a huge honor, who have not been trained for… Your whole life I never did this for you- and now I

must kick myself for not- you understand this…?

Boys- do not trust them all- go with your gut and in here she points- to her head and heart. Those all see them they, not your friends do not let them be- they are two to three times your size, do not be intimidated- you know that word right- um-hum she said. This one girl, girls over her looks of to- show with her eyes- not to scare you- she who knows 50, unlike ways to kill you with a blade. Oh, there will be people like me, too.

People to weed out before the real fun begins. She threw a knife into a five-year-old- a dead girl walking- it hit her in the left eye- at trials killing her- they use real kids here at this so you are going to have to not care about seeing a life end. Were all a waste of a bloodline why not they said this year why not… have real targets- young helpless- kids. It is a sick youngling to see them lose a life- they say wishing from the screens- like dogs forming at a moth in heat.

Her last words- ‘I won’t… I cannot! You know I will not! Zoie, it

repeats over and over in my brain- ‘he says, and they yank us apart and slam the door, and I’ll never know what it was he desired me to evoke. It’s a little ride from the Evenhandedness-Building to the 1920’s train station. I have never been in a car before, a mostly would- and black truck- that looks like it out of the 1921 mostly world cars are outdated now- yet I get to have this- must if all ride rails.

Melisa- cars- Seldom even ridden in motor carriages. In the ridge, we travel on foot- or rail- most do not have the money to have wonderful

things, and if they did, they were overturned. I have seen a few puttering around yet never in one… they bring in the food for the rich and the rich are the one that has the most- buying the troopers off. I see the same year of a truck going down the brick, fire-engine color red, running after the blazes dinging a bell. I have been right not to cry about all this- yet I could not hold it in. The station is swarming, now- I knew really- with reporters are in my face I shy away- I do not want the spotlight with their insect-like cameras trained stanchly on my face as I make

my way over the height bridge in the world.

Nevertheless, I have had a lot of exercise at wiping my face clean of emotions with all the death I have seen. I catch a hint of myself on the television screen over the way the giggle at that- look I made- on the wall that is an expression my influx lives and feel content that I seem almost fearful. If I am going to cry, now is the time to do it. By morning, I will be able to wash the damage done by the tears on my face. Nonetheless, there were lots of tears to come. I am too tired yet not too

numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else.

So, I let the train rock me into oblivion. I put the see-through lacy outfit back on that they give us to sleep in, just slightly crumpled from spending the night on the floor rocking.

21

Time to move the said- there- and passed- on and off- the train finally begins to slow, and suddenly bright light floods the compartment. I ran to the window to see what we have only seen on television, the Bureau, the ruling city. The cameras have not lied

about its splendor. If anything, they have not captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in white and gray and cobalt glass hues that tower into the air. The people begin to point at us eagerly as they are recognizing an honor girl train rolling into the city.

I step away from the window, sickened by their excitement, knowing they cannot wait to watch us die. I see the boy I like over in his car- he holds his ground not being all into me- yet I could tell he was, waving and smiling at the gazing crowd. He only stops when the train pulls into the station, blocking

us from their view I blow him a kiss- no one saw...

Yesterday to say my final goodbyes to my one girlfriend Samee and family. Nevertheless, that is a dark and creaky thing that moves like a snail and smells of sour milk. The walls of this elevator are made of crystal so that you can watch the individuals on the ground floor shrink to ants as you shoot up into the air. I look over the city is just what you would think it looks like- all big and glassy. Say hello to your new home for a week- The Training Center has a tower designed

exclusively for the honors girls. This will be our home until the definite Stars begin. Each Borough has an entire floor. You simply step onto a silo and press the number of your Borough.

Bed- I kick off my shoes and climb undertaking it all off that how I sleep, or I can I have to do this- I play with the hood and fall fast asleep- it is a girl thing- the covers over me I see nothing LIKEWISE, that boy in my tight eyes. The shivering has not stopped. The girl does not even remember me. Nonetheless, I know she does. Do not forget the face of the person who was

your last hope. I pull the covers up over my head as if this will protect me from the redheaded girl who cannot speak. Likewise, I can feel her eyes staring at me, piercing through walls, doors, and bedding. I wonder if she will enjoy watching me- over there- like she would be killing her or the other way around- we share this room now.

2 girls in a small room. They want to see if we are going to kill before the time! Then I am overwhelmed in light-yellow foam that I must scrape off with a heavy bristled brush. Oh, well. At least my blood is

flowing. Slowly, I drag myself out of bed and into the shower. I arbitrarily punch LIKEWISE, tons on the control board, and end up hopping from foot to foot as alternating jets of icy cold and steaming hot water assault me. I put my hair down in the two braids down my front side. This is the first time since the morning of reaping that I resemble myself. No fancy hair and no fancy clothes yet mostly lacy to see if you have

cuts or packing hidden stuff, no flaming capes. Just me. Looking like I

could be headed for the woods. It calms me.

I am nervous about the training. There will be a week of this the first days in which all the star girls practice together with the targets of killing life.

On the last evening, we will each get a chance to achieve in isolated before the star makers. The thought of meeting the other star's uncompromising makes me nauseous. I turn the roll I have just taken from the basket over and over in my hands, LIKEWISE, then my Starvation is gone

only the Starvation of blood to kills is all I need now. Not- Not- Not ME! It is them making ME!

The chatting- I try to focus on the talk, which has twisted to our interview clothes, I do okay they say I need to talk more they say- yet she is cute. We all shower together with us girls I do not like this I am shy, and they look at me like a meet. And what to play with me- U- No! When I open my door, the redheaded girl is collecting my United and boots from where I left them on the floor before my shower. I want to say sorry for getting

her in trouble earlier when I tripped on her hair walking in it is that long.

The face of the redheaded girl intertwines with gory images from earlier Famine Tournaments, with my mother withdrawn and unreachable, with My sister emaciated and terrified. I bolt up screaming for my father to run as the mine explodes into a million deadly bits of light.

Dawn is breaking through the windows I see it all there are no covers on the big windows, yet everyone saw me do everything on-screen even shower and what I did in bed there are

even cams in my fingers and under the sheets how I do not know- LIKEWISE, I know they are- there to see me do that too.

Eat- I had set out to tell her I was sorry about dinner. Nonetheless, I remember I am not supposed to speak to her unless I am giving her an order. She avoids my eyes as we make our way to the table, give a small nod, and eat. My slumbers are filled with disturbing dreams of depth, wetness, and death.

The Bureau has misty, haunted air. My headaches and I must have

bitten into the side of my cheek at night. My tongue probes the ragged flesh and I taste blood.

The boy I like- like- I exchange a look with him. ‘I don’t have any secret about having the tingles down there for him, I want to lock lips at some point I have to before the end.’ The end of what is that? Really what is that all about?’ I’ve eaten enough of your squirrels, yet I don’t know how to kill one- how can I kill a child?’

I never thought about him eating the squirrels I shot. Somehow, I for one continuously see in your mind’s

eye- himself being there I remember her saying. Not out of greed- he there for you remember. On the other hand, then again because town families usually eat expensively

LIKEWISE, her meat. Beef and chicken and horse. I recall this… ‘There’s always hand-to-hand combat.

All you need is to produce a knife, and you will at least stand a chance. If I get jumped, I’m dead!’ I can hear my voice rising in anger. I don’t like to kill I remember saying… cut to now- ‘You won’t- mind- if it’s to live! You will be living up in some tree-

eating raw squirrels and picking off individuals with arrows. You know what my Zoie said to me when she came to say goodbye as if to cheer me up, she says neighborhood 14 will finally have a winner. Then I comprehended, she did not mean me, she meant you!' said- the boy.

The boy- she is a dismissal, I know- it... my hope to look out for her- until the time comes, I can no longer.

Melisa- I know he is not lying about that- I heard in his thoughts before all of this. Him- he has-, physical power that is strong and perfect tilts

his eyes ever so right and his six-pack chest at me in the light- the advantage with the girls- would I be that girl- to see the eyes shine for me- as I look at these white teeth- ever so right.

Training Center- Throw a spear- a woman said- that was teaching at the nine-year-old girl's head and kill her- kill her- if you do not you go down in your points. Spend the time trying to learn something you do not know, I remember her saying to me- going back- Weights try do not overdo and hurt your body, do not reveal how much you can lift in front of the other stars.

They do not need to see that you are meeker than they, you are going to train group that is not far- it kills, or they kill you without blinking- and lick you up and down to spit on it, rubbing it all in you. The plan’s the same for both of you if you are smart, you will get this I cannot say- just think hart Melisa and go with your intentions- wink.

Zoie- Learn to tie a decent knot and so on, you and your gun and to pack ammo- I do not even care about the bow much to show- that if you run out of other things you only have five

aero’s anyways, that are tipped in bad stuff- do not tuck the tip- K. Um-hum- I say childishly. Save showing knife for there going at that point- what you are best at until your private sessions. Are we good?’

I nod- Zoie this was the day before the callouts. Do not fire the small one unless it is deep in their left boob, and squeeze hard, it will take about a day for them to die slowly- yet they back off. Do not ever panic- or you will die- do not sweat in the cold your you will die- also.

Now night- I bit my lip and stalk back to my room, making sure he- the boy that I like- like- can hear the door slam yet he sees all of me with the screen in his room and the double-sided firebox. I sit on the bed, undressing, hating him over they are doing things I do not understand, hating myself hard saying my name- to mention that I was feeling the same. Is it- love…?

Is this love- I see and now feel…?

As his thought was turned on to me in my mind and his by them. In my bed him have this with me- and

does he- it was a lovemaking moment of heightened lust. The people went nuts for us- feeling this moment, of zenith.

Pretending to be friends, the next day I hear giggles from the other girls! Talking about each other's strengths is a bond, insisting the other take credit for their abilities. Because, in fact, at some point, we are going to have to knock it off and accept we are bitter adversaries. Stupid instruction that we stick together in training like his hand on me at night. It is the fault I was ripped on his too, I was doing it right never did that one, yet I saw it

through his eyes- and mine in his- with switched like bodies at the end feeling, and seeing within and out, for telling him he did not have to coach us disjointedly.

Nevertheless, that did not mean I wanted to do everything with him today so they could see the crematory- of a puppy- the love they call it. He was all into me not letting his hand off me and not stopping them from his hands feeling me up down the uniform. Yah

I had a hand full of LIKEWISE, - so did he- cute right!

22

I hear his voice in my head- saying cute things. She has no idea- over there that this is what she was thinking about. Although along with what she needed to know. I made sure she knew what not to hear- and see- in training… for she is the girl, I picked to work with as a team. The effect she can have on him is a lot some say he not thinking clearly to learn to fight- that he will pass fast- daydreaming of her- ha, that is what they think he said- in his thoughts. Visibly they meant to degrade me and him. -Right? Likewise,

a tiny part of my phenomena is praise. That he meant I was interesting- in some way.

It is ten p.m. I clean my teeth and smooth back my hair again. Anger temporarily blocked out my nervousness about meeting the other teams, LIKEWISE, now I can feel my anxiety rising once more. I catch myself biting my nails.

Late-night- It is weird how much he is noticed me from within and out. Alike with the kindness, he is paid to my hunting- over the years- um like was not enough. Besides deceptively, I

have not been as oblivious to him as I imagined, moreover. I have kept track of all of this in my beep mind they said.

Blood spatter- off with youngling's heads- let the bodies hit the floor- let the young bodies hit the floor! DEATH! I look around at the Career girls who are showing off, obviously trying to intimidate the field. Then at the others, the malnourished, the incompetent, shakily having their first education with a knife or an ax. They walk up and we show off with them having to in programmed in their mind to die- they even so sick to ask for it.

100 girls under 10 knocked-off in less than 30 minutes… Only five low-class boys hurt not all killed.

The doors open into an enormous gymnasium filled with various weapons to practice with- you in the fight we only have what we had at our homes- so if you have an Ak-47 good for you- I do not- far no- yet that is not what this is about- it is about blood falling to the floor!

I move on to the obstacle courses. The actual training rooms are below the ground level of our building- and in the night lit fields. With these

elevators going in and out with them in control- yet again, the ride is less than a few a moment.’ Although it is not yet nine in the morning, we are here all day today, we are the last ones to arrive.

The other stars are met in a tense circle like a dojo- it is about respect to the past- twisted in their tournament.

My man and I are the only two dressed alike. As soon as we join the circle, the head trainer, a tall, Experts in each skill will remain at their positions, a sporty female named steps up and begins to explain the training

agenda she towers over me not him though. Some of the stations teach survival skills, other fighting techniques. We are forbidden to engage in any combative exercise with another try LIKEWISE. There are assistants on hand if we want to practice with a partner. We will be free to travel from area to area as we choose, according to our mentor's instructions. 'Suppose we tie some knots,' I say, they all giggle-like I am retarded! He said it was cute…! Is that all that matters?

We pass an unfilled post where the trainer seems satisfied to have

schoolchildren. You get the feeling that the knot-tying class is not the Starvation stars burning spot. When he apprehends, I know something about snares, he shows us a simple, excellent trap that will leave a human competitor dangling by a leg from a tree- now outside in the fields barricaded in with high walls- all white.

And bright lights…We concentrate on this one skill for an hour until both of us have mastered all that is needed. Then we move on to concealment. He genuinely enjoys this station, twirling a combination of mud

and clay and berry juices around on his pale skin, weaving disguises from vines and leaves.

The instructor who runs the concealment position is full of passion for his work- yes some are just A-holes.

23

(Back)

The crescent moon roll dotted with seeds from Borough 13. Somehow, although it is made from the same gear as I walk to 14, it looks a lot more mouthwatering than the horrible drop

biscuits that are the standard fare at home. I had to get something, didn't I?

Playing with him- We both give a convincing laugh and ignore the stares from around the room. I tried breathing- my face lost- as I recall the event, a Permitted story, in which I had stupidly defied a black bear over the rights to a skep. My boy is laughing and asks questions right on cue. He is much better at this than I am at that too- so cute, right? On the second day, while we are taking a shot at spear throwing, he whispers to me all sweet things and

nothing. ‘We have a shadow of me now.’

I throw my spear, which I am not too bad at if I do not have to throw too far and see the little girl from Borough 1 standing back a bit, watching us. She is ten-year-old, the other one that is small yet not as petite as me in stature. Up close she looks like a lost schoolgirl- walking in a playground. She has optimistic, dark, eyes and lustrous skin and stands tilted up on her toes with her arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the smallest amount of

sound. It is impossible not to think of a bluebird.

I bit my lip. Permitted is a small yellow flower that grows in the Field. Leah. My sister Rose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet. (Thinking back, I was…)

Cut ripped out into reality- I pick up another spear while my boy throws one that I gave him. ‘Her names are Leah,’ I say softly. I remember her some…

My heart sinks… Almost all the boys and at least half of the girls are

bigger than I am, even though many of the tries LIKEWISE, have never been fed properly. Kids- You can see it in their bones, their skin, and the hollow look in their eyes.

Now that I know she is there, it is hard to ignore, that I am the youngest child in the room. She slips up and joins us at different stations. Like me, she is clever with plants, climbs swiftly, and has a good aim. She can hit the target every time with a slingshot. What is a slingshot against a 225-pound male with a sword that going to get

her…? Oh, yes this is all she must fight with- far-right? NO!

I read down the list of the skills from stations. I was part of my eyes cannot help flitting around to the others. It is the first time we have been collected, on level ground, in simple clothes. The exceptions are the kids from the wealthier Boroughs, the volunteers, the ones who have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment. I may be smaller naturally, LIKEWISE, overall, my family’s ingenuity has given me an edge in that area.

The slight benefit I held coming into the Training Center, my fiery entrance last night, seems to disappear in the attendance of my opposition. The others were jealous of us- I knew- he knew, LIKEWISE, not because we were astounding since our graphic designer and a team like the makeup guys were. That is what we to look at that part and all.

About- It is technically against the rules to train try LIKEWISE before they reach the Bureau LIKEWISE, it happens every year. The meat and plants from the woods combined with

the exertion it took to get them have given me a healthier body than most of those I see around me.

Now I see nothing LIKEWISE, contempt in the glances of the Career trying LIKEWISE. Each must have fifty to a hundred pounds on me.

In area 14, we call them occupation acknowledgments or just careers. Besides, like as not, the champion will be one of them. They project arrogance and prominently. I stand straight up, and while I am thin, I am strong. The tri LIKEWISE, from 1,

2, and 7 conventionally have this look about them.

When Alla releases us, they head straight for the lethal tall stick- with a gold spoon up to her LIKEWISE, is looking over all the weapons in the gym and handle them with ease.

I am thinking that it is lucky I am a fast runner when he nudges my arm and I jump yet in an effective way. He is still beside me- his expression is sober- yet loving to me only.

Moving on- ‘where would you like to begin?’ When we finally escape to bed on the second night with me, he

mumbles that were not getting any sleep, I make a sound that is somewhere between a snort and a laugh, saying okay- I want what I want- so let give them a late-night show to see- Then catch myself doing more than ever with him. It is messing with my mind too much, trying to keep straight when we are friends, not full-on lovers at this age- yet age is nothing to them or us at this point- we have sex all night!

Then when we are not ready for all this we no- yet we got it all down and in and out, to say the least. Bang!

Bang- bang- bang- bang! You know exactly with happen by that! Done! Aww- okay put it back in- We even broke the bed! I will know where we stand with the folks seeing this- we have fans big time.

‘Let us pretend there’s no one around- and keep on keeping on with this.’ ‘God not so fast and hard’- I no- take it- I said riding even hard for that to go- you have too- ‘well- uh’ he said- you are good I say. Umm, we said together, and I got the O!

Next to seeing all the wannabes! Seeing all the ass with

cams! - I am sick of this- I did not sleep last night- crank yes, after that, we only talk in front of people- about how I got plowed- and then frogged him after- and went for the good night kiss too- and my love life at nine years old. Crap- They start to call our numbers out of lunch, for our cloistered sessions with the Tournament Producers. The area by region, first the girl, then the boy.

As usual, Borough 14 is slated to go first- for I am the youngster here they call me. We linger in the dining room, unsure where else to go. No one comes back once they have left. As the

room empties, the pressure to appear friendly lightens. By the time they call Leah, we are left alone. We sit quietly until they summon my lover to come. He rises- with my hand in hand.

‘Thanks. I will,’ he says. ‘You- Shoot straight.’

I nod- I do not know why I said anything at all. Although if I am going to lose, I would rather win with him than the others.

Better for our Borough, for my mother and my sister.

After about fifteen minutes, they called my name. I smooth my hair, set my shoulders back, and walk into the gymnasium. Instantly, I know I am in trouble. They have been here too long, the Tournament Producers. Sat through twenty-three other demonstrations. I had too much wine, most of them. I want more than anything to go home.

There is nothing I can do LIKEWISE, continue with the plan. I walk to the archery station. Oh, the weapons!

I have been itching to get my hands on them for days! Bows made of wood, plastic, metal, and materials I cannot even name. Arrows with feathers cut in flawless uniform lines. I choose a bow, string it, and sling the matching quiver of arrows over my shoulder.

There is a shooting range, LIKEWISE, it is much too limited. Standard bull’s-eyes and human silhouettes. I walk to the center of the gymnasium and pick my first target. The dummy was used for knife practice. Even as I pull back on the bow, I know

something is wrong. The string's tighter than the one I use at home. The arrow's more rigid. I miss the dummy by a couple of inches and lose what little attention I had been commanding. For a moment, I am humiliated, then I head back to the bullseye. I shoot repeatedly until I get the feel of these new weapons.

Back in the center of the gymnasium, I take my initial position and skewer the dummy right through the heart. Then I sever the rope that holds the sandbag for boxing, and the bag splits open as it slams to the

ground. Without pausing, I shoulder to roll forward, come upon one knee, and send an arrow into one of the hanging lights high above the gymnasium floor. A shower of sparks bursts from the fixture.

It is an excellent shooting. I turn to the Tournament Producers. A few are nodding approval, LIKEWISE, most of them are fixated on a roast pig that has just arrived at their banquet table.

Suddenly, I am furious that with my life on the line, they do not even have the decency to pay attention

to me. That I am being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Tournament maker's' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief.

'Thank you for your consideration,' I say. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit without being dismissed.

As I stride toward the elevator, I fling my bow to one side and my quiver to the other. I brush past the gaping Avoxes who guard the elevators and hit the number twelve landed on with my fist. The doors slide together, and I zip upward. I make it back to my floor before the tears start running down my cheeks. I can hear the others calling me from the sitting room, LIKEWISE, I fly down the hall into my room, bolt the door, and fling myself onto my bed.

Then I begin to sob.

Now- I have done it! Now I have ruined everything! If I had stood even a ghost of a chance, it vanished when I sent that arrow flying at the Tournament Producers. What will they do to me now? Arrest me? Execute me? Cut my tongue and turn me into an Avex so I can wait on the future stars of Panel?

What was I thinking, shooting at the Tournament Producers? Unquestionably, I am situated, I was shooting at that apple, because I was so angry at being overlooked. I was not trying to kill one of them, yet I want so-

to do that. If I would have, I would be dead fast!

Oh, what does it matter? It is not like I was going to win the Tournament anyway. Who cares what they do to me? What scares me is what they might do to Zoie and me, how my family might suffer now because of my impulsiveness. Will, they take their few belongings, or send my mother to prison and me to the community home, or kill them? They would not kill them, would they?

Why not? What do they care about? I should have hung around and

asked for forgiveness. Otherwise, I chuckled, like it was a big pun. Then maybe I would have found some compassion. Likewise, then again instead, I followed out of the place in the worst- mannered manner conceivable.

I shout for them to go away and eventually they do. It takes at least an hour for me to cry myself out. Then I just lay curled up on the bed, stroking the silken sheets with my hood, feeling him run through and out of me- watching the sunset over all the land- they all could see in, and the cam was

flaking its red-light- right down where you could see my pinkie- kitty. That is what they asked for when sending in money to get sponsors. Being cute and hot sales to them- that what I was whispered in my mind by him over the way to his room.

In the early parts of the day at the stars, before that though, they will give me a score so low, no one in their right mind would sponsor me. That is what will happen tonight. Since the training is not open to viewers, the Tournament Producers announce a score for each player. I expect guards

to come for me. Nevertheless, as time passes, it seems less likely. I calmed down. They still need a girl - from constituency 14, don’t they? If the Tournament Producers want to punish me, they can do it publicly. Wait until I am in the arena and sic starving wild animals on me. You can bet they will make sure I do not have a bow and arrow to protect me. Also- with what I said before. It gives the audience a starting place for the betting that will continue throughout the stars.

I wish the stylists had not shown up because for some reason, I do

not like the idea of substandard them. It is as if I have tossed away all the decent work they did at the opening ceremonies without a thought. I avoid looking at anyone as I take tiny spoonsful of potato soup. The saltiness reminds me of my tears. I had been anticipating my shooting skills might get me a six or a seven or more- like a ten, even if I am not particularly powerful. Now I am sure I will have the lowest score of twenty-five. If no one sponsors me, my odds of staying alive decrease to zip.

(Back)

The walkout of the town as a star the others would spit- lap- bit and rip on us thinking there were higher up thin us- we did this naked as the day we came into this hellish world. I Borough has gotten rid of us- like trash. We are the property of them- not a farce- they do not want us here or anywhere in these parts after our time is up- unless you are the winner- there weeding us out.

The walk was long and blasting on the feet- my sister saying you will make it back- no you will not on girl said. On the train, I sat- box cars-

changed. I had to shove a tube up my LIKEWISE, - hidden way up in my ass- so far, I could feel it in my gut, and they thought was poopy- with 1,000 or so of currency in it. You saw me take that out- gross right! 50% of us will pass the first day- you can make it if you have the cash!

Run- there is no one or place to go- money is the way out- one cut a girl got last night to get the cash out of her. Syaga was her… she was odd, to say the least. Famine was high- in the cars where they opened them and hosed you down boy and girls alike- still naked.

Sleep was hard on the cars rocking down the skinny rail tracks- feeling every bump- with eyes over the way showing- I WANT TO KILL YOU.

Hot and cold in the blue and white cars- Steam and sound of highs over rolling hills. I was shanked on the hand and told by Syasa she would cut my head off if I did suck on her off. The march passes us we look- making a distraction- with a cut to a face- some run for it going for the river over the way- yet they get some and smash their feet not killing them- that would be like killing a girl before banging her with

yah did- just making sure they would never get away- hobbling they call it. One was shot- I did not even know her name- yet no one gives a rat’s ass. The smalls of pigs and fish- rotting with humans- a head off over the way- too much- we walk into the camp are new home. Line up they yell at the head man; the drummer plays his death march.

The boy Sage is looking dumb with his mouth open.

You are- Jailers-

Rolls called out-

- The first time one tries to escape at 3 years of jail time- and the right to kill you without say. 2nd adds 2 more each time.

- Masturbate is a NO- something that you should do it drains strength unless a par team. Those that do well have- do this in front of a camera and say why they need it.

- Saving is done in 5 minutes by the hands of a staffer where you can shower for 15 minutes. We march around still unclothed as they all see… I was the one that wants to see the most is all pubescent.

Boys love that… so they can see it all!

There I was… until training.

All are chained down to their bad unless in a partnership. The hospitality was high- at some ran there too- killed with high power Tommy guns.

24

I got my boy fast before I went here, yet I do love him. I- he was the crunch of my life anyway- I said to them in a chat… Permitted all Leah. The rat that said they would buy you out- is

Tostito- give a long run and ways out- yet into a trap. A boy is dragging a dead girl by the hair no- still marching around to show how strong we are. I could hear the accordion music of my homeland playing in my mind as I was a week yet not stopping.

I can get you a train- he would say to them- and you would get there, and it was a rusted out 1888, with parts missing. I had no choices the one said- if I stay in this hole- I will perish! She came back hobbled, and she killed herself staking her fist down her mouth.

Oh yeah- Yet not after donning these 5 times. We are going to break you! That is what they said to us as we got on the train here.

Zoie- I ran after her not caring about life- I was even placed in an open jail-like room for saying something to a trooper he did not like- where it would rain- or sun or more- no lights- bats and rats all over- I had

to poop in the corner. I was sent to Demise Island over in the triangle, you can see me here waking passing, I know I would not make it back to see if she is alive- yet I know I

might- if I stay strong and eat all they give I know that I can make it some- its jizz full- watery shit they give me.

When I pop my head out the steel doors. I said F-U- and get my food cut ½ of what it was!! I giggled crazily in the rain coming down… and when I shit- they do not like that closing off the top with a blackout plat.

I started eating bugs… The running the crawling was nuts in the mud- and woodlands. I even jumped off 1,200 feet in the air. They would hold my head with a pipe to make me suffer- for being me. The girl that showed her

what she needed to know. I look good hair falling out- I know I look okay- death not far- yet I must be strong for her- even if the odds are not in my favor. I rip my teeth out that were rotting.

A trooper would come in every night and fondle me- I could not do anything or more time was added. He would kiss me all over too- I fought some- yet gave in to get out. I saw a girl being dragged out by their lags, for them to have a good time- I was one- and yes, we all were stripped. This is what I get just for my blood type and

heritage. Used as a -ho! I got tattoos; I did not want to… covering my arms.

I get 50 more nights- for yelling at the troopers for playing with myself, yet can you not- some say they do… lies? I am failing, and I know… that is okay if it is for her to live on.

(Forward)

After two years of this, I was a broken girl.

25

One was made a show- and the blade went down hard and fast- she was only five. The number, which is

between one and twelve, one being irredeemably bad and twelve being unattainably high, signifies the promise of the try LIKEWISE. The mark is not a guarantee of which person will win. It is only an indication of the potential of a try LIKEWISE, shown in training.

Frequently, because of the variables in the actual arena, high scoring tries LIKEWISE, go down almost immediately. As well as a few years ago, the boy who won the Stars only received a three. Still, the scores can help or hurt individual stars in

terms of sponsorship. I masticated that… I choose I may as well go.

The scores will be televised tonight. It is not like I can hide what happened forever. I go to the bathroom and wash my face, LIKEWISE, it is still red and splotchy. All and sundry waiting at the table, even Pahyai and Lattie. The adults begin some chitchat about the weather forecast, and I let my eyes meet me and my boy. He raises his eyebrows. A question. What happened? I just give my head a small shake. Then, as they are serving the main course, I hear the reporter says,

‘Okay, enough small talk, just how bad were you today?’

Somehow calling me sweetheart is off enough at this for an awe moment- that I am at least able to speak. ‘I shot an arrow at the Tournament Producers to show what I can do big crowds.’ Everyone stopped eating when I shot to girls with one aero- as they were moving. ‘You what?’ The horror in Gannah’s voice confirms my worst suspicions.

‘I shot an arrow at them. Not exactly at them. In their direction. It is like My boy said, I was shooting, and

they were ignoring me and me just. I just lost my head, so I shot an apple out of their stupid roast pig's mouth!' I say defiantly.

'And what did they say?' says Cinna carefully.

'Nothing. Or I do not know. I walked out after that,' I say.

'Without being dismissed?' Gasps Gannah. 'I dismissed myself,' I said. I remember how I promised my sister that I really would try to win, and I feel like a ton of coal has dropped on me.

See they would have to reveal what happened in the Training Center for it to have any worthwhile effect on the population. People would need to know what you did. Likewise, they cannot sense it is secret, so it would be a waste of effort,' says Gannah. 'More likely they'll make your life hell in the arena.' 'Well, they've already promised to do that to us anyway,' says my strong brave man.' Well, that's that,' says Gannah.

Then he LIKEWISE, terms into a roll.

‘Do you think they’ll arrest me?’ I ask.

‘Doubt it… be a pain to replace you at this stage,’ says Gannah.

‘What about my household…?’ I speak.

‘Will they discipline them…?’

‘Don’t think so- maybe have them show the spread eagle…?

(Giggling) the many- many- people, in the stadium.

Would not make much sense.

‘Very Leah,’ says Gannah. And I realize the impossible has happened. They have cheered me up. Gannah picks up a pork chop with his fingers, which makes Gannah frown, and dunks it in his wine.

He rips off a hunk of meat and starts to chuckle. ‘What were their faces like?’ I can feel the edges of my mouth tilting up. ‘Shocked. Terrified. Uh, preposterous, some of them.’ Pop into my mind. ‘One man tripped backward into a bowl of punch.’

Gannah guffaws and we all start laughing except Gannah, although

even she is suppressing a smile. ‘Well, it serves them right. It is their job to pay attention to you. And just because you come from Borough Twelve is no excuse to ignore you.’ Then her eyes dart around as if she is said something outrageous. ‘I’m sorry, LIKEWISE, that’s what I think,’ she says to no one in precise. ‘I’ll get an awfully bad score,’ I say. ‘Scores only matter if they’re particularly good, no one pays much attention to the bad or mediocre ones.

My family is safe… right?

Time to go- you…dah…

Next time you see me- I grin at him and realize that I am starving. I cut off a piece of pork, dunk it in mashed potatoes, and start eating. It is okay.

Plus, if they are safe- I do not feel they are, no actual harm has been done- they say to me in my mind- with a snicker- that I did not like- yet what could I do about it?

I chatted with my boy he said-

‘People use that tactic,’ he said to me. ‘I hope that’s how people interpret the four I’ll probably get,’ tells me. ‘If that. Is anything less impressive than watching a person pick

up a heavy ball and throw it a couple of yards? One landed on my foot… or toe.’

After dinner, we go to the sitting room to watch the scores announced on television. First, they show a photo of the truth- and fallen-LIKEWISE, then flash their score below it. Most of the other players average a six. Surprisingly, little Permitted produces a seven. I do not know what she showed the judges, LIKEWISE, she is so tiny it must have been impressive. The Career LIKEWISE, - naturally get in the eight-to-ten range.

Constituency 14 comes up last, as usual. He pulls a five, the lowest of all boy- it is all the sex they giggle- so at least a couple of the Tournament Producers must have been watching him. I dig my fingernails into my palms as my face comes up, expecting the worst. Then they are flashing the number eleven on the screen. Everybody is slapping me on the ass and cheering and congratulating me- on getting F-ed and going to die for not have a real man.

Nevertheless, it does not seem real.

‘There must be a mistake- I think with the- OH SHIT look on my face. How? How- could that happen…?’ I asked Gannah.

At dawn, I lie in bed for a while, watching the sun come up on a beautiful morning. It is on Sunday. A day off at home. I wonder if my sisters - is- well or not- in the woods yet, I knew that they would do something like that it came around to me.

‘Melisa, the girl with a shy spirit,’ says Jannah and hugs me.

Jannah is an old friend of Gannah her gay girlfriend and that is

not allowed either in the stars- or they would be a couple one reason, they were picked to wipe out their gay ways- a sickness as they say- just like our stars. Naughtily… they kiss- saying kill us!

And they did the next time we chatted, yet they were hand and hand- and in love- or so they said. One girl said that is better than dying for Jesus… No comment- yet I have some faith.

My man- and I congratulate each other for making it this far, another awkward moment- as we make

out... saying are dreams if we make it- knowing one must die- We've both done well, LIKEWISE, what does that mean for the other? I escape to my room as quickly as possible and burrow down under the covers. The stress of the day, particularly the crying, has worn me out. I drifted off, relieved, and with the number eleven still flashing behind my eyelids.

I had been struggling along on my own for about six months when I first ran into Bale in the woods. It was a Sunday in October, the air cool and pungent with dying things. I had spent

the morning competing with the squirrels for nuts, and the slightly warmer afternoon wading in shallow ponds harvesting Melisa.

26

The boy- The only meat I would shoot was a squirrel, which had practically run over my toes, in its quest for acorns, nevertheless, the animals would still be afoot, when the snow buried my other food sources. Having strayed further than afield than usual, I was speeding up back home, lugging my burlap sacks when I came across a dead rabbit. I had been trying

to use snares all summer with no success, so I could not help dropping my sacks to examine this one.

That’s risky…’ My fingers were just on the wire above one of the rabbits when a voice rang out. ‘It was hanging by its neck in a thin wire a foot above my head. About fourteen yards away was another.

What she said to do- ‘That you can’t believe a little girl from Borough fourteen has done this well. The whole thing has been more than you ever could have dreamed of. Talk about my clothes. How nice the people are…?

How the city amazes you… say what you love- If you will not talk about yourself, at least complement the audience. Just keep turning it back around, all right.'

I am familiar with twitch-up snares because my father used them. When the prey is caught, it is jerked into the air out of the reach of other starving animals. I brought it back for her- and that was when love started.

Melisa- The next hours are agonizing. At once, it is clear I cannot gush. We try to make myself

overconfident, LIKEWISE, I just do not have arrogance.

I’m too ‘defenseless’ for ferociousness, I’m not witty, humorous, erotic, and or secretive- like you.

~*~

At the Starvation Tournament part of the Stars, at every living being in the Bureau by marvelous dishes around my room. When the girl with the rainbow hair comes in to turn down my bed, her eyes widen at the mess. ‘Just leave it!’ I yell at her. ‘Just leave it alone!’ I hate her, I never hated anyone, or anything till now- too, with

her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Bureau, both now and then. For her, justice must finally be fashionable.

Why am I letting her? At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods. Likewise, instead of fleeing the room, the girl closes the door behind her and goes to the bathroom. She comes back with a damp cloth and wipes my face gently then cleans- the blood from a broken plate off my hands. Why is she doing this? She shakes her head. ‘I should have tried to save you,’ I whisper. Does this

mean we were right to stand by? Has she forgiven me? ‘No, it was wrong,’ I say. She taps her licks making them wet, with her fingers then points to my chest with her knife. She means that I would just have ended dead. When we move on…

I spent the next hour helping the girl that has taken a liking to me in a sexual is cleaning sea and I am room. For sex, and to get on the good side of me- I play along not trusting her- is just sex, right?

Cleaned away is all that makes us little girls in a room, she turns down

my bed. I crawl in between the sheets like a five-year-old and let her tuck me in. Then she gets in with me- and the fun starts for her- I want her to stay until I fall asleep- I never like sleep alone anyway- I always sleep with my sister. Yet she is taking time away from me and my lover- I get it so does he- to be there when I wake up. I want the protection of this girl, even though she never had mine.

In the morning, it is not the girl LIKEWISE, my prep team who is hanging over me. I remember my lessons with my sisters in my mind.

Huge bright blue eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink. Finally, they cover my entire body in a powder that makes me shimmer in the lights. Then Melia goes to work on my hair, weaving strands of red into a pattern that begins at my left ear, wraps around my head, and then falls in one braid down my right shoulder. The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms, painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails. They erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out.

He walks in- with us two girls- ‘Close your eyes girls,’ he orders. Me- I can feel the silken inside as they slip it down over my stark- naked body, then the weight for his callouts of what he wanted to do with me after he did what he wanted with her. I clutch her hand rubbing my- hand as I blindly touch my goodies, glad to find they are at least two inside. There are some adjusting and jiggling. Then silence… and the end for the first. With just the girls as he and the viewers looking!

Freak me I yell! He crawls up between my legs where he stops to rid

me of my sodden panties. He slings it away carelessly, his eyeing eyes never leaving the bare place they covered. He continues to stare, licking his lips– obviously beyond aroused by the sight LIKEWISE, there is nothing to hide my intimate folds and I feel exposed, squirming, and certain that my blush reaches down there. He takes his sweet, torturous time - enjoying his private viewing commotion. He makes no move to touch me LIKEWISE, the ravenous molds his face is pushing me to run up onto him with wild desire, taking his time. I shift response with desolate moments.

With my body on top of his I stroke my hand over the sprinkling of stubble, on- easily with myself with every curve and dip of his face. You are so precious, thank you for taking another chance on me. Laying in his chest with my head- while he grips my inner thighs, pushing them apart. Keep still or I will make you- then he kisses my lips and the other set. I gasp at his challenging threat and on pure instinct and raw desire, my hips tilt up by their own accord, crazy in their need for any contact.

My legs are bent with my knees resting on either side of his head. My bottom sits on his chest, taking my weight, which leaves my secret opening utterly gaping and vulnerable, not to mention close to his sinful mouth. I can feel his breath on me, fluttering and making my heart stutter. His hands slip around, cupping my backside as he pushes me into him for the sex that was about to be made, inhaling deeply like what I feel inside me. Besides what she already had. Did I care yes- LIKEWISE, I want to live off at night and I need a girlfriend too here.

27

The night before the stars- all the girls in their fancy dress all colors and shapes. ‘I have to, I’m dizzy!’ I am also giggling, which I think I have done never in my lifetime.

Likewise, the nerves and the spinning have gotten to me. My boy- wraps a protective arm around me. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve got you. Can’t have you following in your mentor’s footsteps.’ He is the one- that I love here just so you know that- yet I am girl

I will try anything once even girls… I kissed a girl, and it was okay…

I said to them passing out like… for what that all though it is not that bad- mom and dad it what happens with girls this age! They are going to get Freaked- that is the times- just ask MTV- the show and the music.

I- you find this affiance stop viewing moms and dads, I am sure your kid would say what wrong with this? There was not much said- I am sure I no more than you do at my age in sex- like most girls my age! If you do like it do something else- yet I assure you- which your kid will not- and say your nuts, for not letting them look at me-

for there doing just what I am- and as of this year, it is right.

~*~

More chatting with the interviewers- Woot- woot is all I hear as I stand there looking at them all! They like me, they like me. I swallow hard. ‘She asked me to try hard to win.’ The audience is frozen, hanging on my every word. ‘And what did you say?’ prompts Caesar gently. Nevertheless, instead of warmth, an icy rigidity takes over my body.

‘I bet you did,’ says your lovers a, a squeeze. The buzzer goes off-

saying no. My muscles tense as they do before a kill just to show that I could- Kill is okay to this world- yet saying- Freak is not- and ripping her heart out is okay too? Yet some light sex is not I asked- they were like shocked by that one- something I should not have questioned… why? When I speak, my voice seems to have gone up an octave. ‘I swore I would do this and not be right.’ They all gapped- like I should not have… why? It’s not the 1900’s anymore or the 2000s- get what I mean- I said to them in my mind- they said to drop it. As we cut to a break.

Talk about this perfect love you have with him? His eyes his face, his body… and nothing else… do not say what you feel I said in my mind? They did not like that… I was not whining points for saying what I wanted and that was a boy banging me in the night- as a real girl would do. Pissed- I shyly get up that what they want a shy girl with a fake small on her face- ‘Sorry we’re out of time, yet that is me- LIKEWISE, come on here…

What do you want to see? I asked- on brake…

Death?

Lust?

Killing?

Or me?

Where are my Life and Love- come in- it is all for you, and I feel cheated- and then they said remember whom you are a nine-year star…Your dead to us either way.

They make me not me… just a program of what they want.

A heel like applause continues long after I am seated back with the others. I looked at Sani for comfort, and she looked at me like what. He gives

me a side thumb as I walk to him. Sani is a boy that makes sure I do not F- it up. What happened to be sweet? I said I just did not feel like it today… Hello- I am NINE-YEAR-OLD- girl! I feel like crying! Best of luck, Melisa Elizabeth Elosteen, the star girl from region 14.'

28

I am still in a daze… sitting through his interview. He has the audience from the get they not sure about him like- go, though; I can hear them laughing at him for not having just one girl, shouting out. He got the same question and went into detail of-

how he banged this girl- and that was okay for he is a boy… and boys can have sex with anyone and that a-okay- yet a girl is a slut- if she thinks about it. No respect for girls at all in the tournament. Or in our lives as girls! I knew he had to say this- yet I was not contented.

A shake of his head said to me to not- think about it, I was turn off to him, so I would not talk for him… There must be some special girl right what one? Come on, what's her name?' says the man in black- Um- she over there he points.

Sounds of understanding from the crowd-

Why her…? …?

29

‘I don’t know… Likewise, none of the boys/girls like her for whom she is,’ he says. ‘So, here’s what you do. You win, you go home. She may not be there or the other way around?’ The man said discouragingly. I- I- a – do not know… oh my…! …?

For a moment, the cameras hold on him down casting on his eyes as what he says sinks in. Then I can see

my face, mouth half opens in a mixture with surprise and complaint, overblown on every screen as I realize, me… He means me… right? I press my lips together and stare at the floor, hoping this will conceal the emotions starting to boil up inside of me. I never knew at that time… the girl that was shown and since I would not look up, they never said. That was the punishment- with a head in my mind.

30

I take a shower and scrub the gold paint, the makeup, the scent of beauty from my body. All that remains

of the design- the team’s efforts are the flames on my nails. I strip all that is fake and gay to me of my body rapping all the places- that you should not see- yet you do. Brush my teeth- hair- and the underwire is put on with PJs until bedtime… was I slip out… I do some reading- and see the news that I do not want to see about everything and the world all crazy. I see the hell that we live in, and I do not want to- yet they make me. There is only one hour was there not feeling the inside of me- or hearing my every emotion.

It will give me something to hold on to in the days to come. I pull on a thick, fleecy nightgown and climb into bed. It takes me about five seconds to realize I will never fall asleep. And I need sleep very much, because in the arena every moment I give in to fatigue will be an invitation to death. It is no good. One hour, two, three passes, and my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I cannot stop trying to imagine exactly what terrain I will be thrown into.

Return…? Marsh…?

A frigid inhospitable-surroundings…?

I am hoping for trees, which may afford me some means of concealment, food, and shelter, Often- there are trees, for the cause that barren landscapes are dull glum yet awe-inspiring- and the Tournament resolves too quickly without them. On the other hand, what will the climate be like?

Questioned- What traps have the Tournament Producers had burrow to liven up the slower moments? As well as then there is my fellow esteems.

The more anxious I am to find sleep, the more it eludes me. Finally, I

am too restless to even stay in bed. I pace the floor, heart beating too fast, breathing hard- yet not holding it in. My room feels like a prison cell to me as I said. Worse than what I know she had- yet not at all. It is all in my mind the imprisonment. That is spooky!

The idea of being strong for someone else has never entered their heads, I find myself in the position of having to console them. Since I am the person going in to be slaughtered, this is annoying.

I ran down the hall saying, I had enough- to the door- to the roof- I

went not allowed- LIKEWISE, I am there. It is not only unlocked LIKEWISE, ajar so how is going to stop me- I see them adding traps and things out for us- they will not know I was on my time. Something that they never thought of is how I paled all this on my time to win.

The plan that they cannot get into- for I have coded something my dad made for us when this was added in me- he said they do not need to know all your life. My dad was somewhat of an inventor- also on this site as a hobby.

Yet there is a lot of chatting here- nothing is far in the tournament- we all play dirty- there are no roles just kill- the one you see and knock them out! My sisters are the ones that worked for this moment not me- so what was it I got from her the day I left home this code of how to do this… just by putting my forehead to hers and scanning it all in. I want to see the sky and how the day is going to go and so on- the moon with the stars- on the last night that no one will be hunting me- that why I know where I am.

Like a compass, all I must do is look at the time on my hand to get north now.

I knew that all I needed was a pace of my hair in with a magnetically charged paperclip and I have the same thing, something I ripped off one of the desks. Along with other trivial things like a flint rock and the back of my knife. Smock you die for them seeing you- yet you can live without it in the bush. The first thing you need is water- not killing… I know this they do not. Food I good for three weeks…

I will find what I can- yet I know there is not much out there. You kill the tournament and you are going to be eaten by them at night. Your sent will kill you fast in the bush them hunting you. A tree living it is not working for me- yet some say they think that would work- I say no- two words- BIG cats. We are not at the top of the food chain here- replaying is something I need to know- she did- I did not LIKEWISE, I have it all!

Everything I need to know… for that, I will always be edited. And I think- some knew this and that is why

she is where she is… LIKEWISE, they had to see if I would make it. The what-if…!

My thoughts- You know, you could live a thousand lifetimes and not deserve him. My nightmares are usually about losing you. I am okay once I realize you are here. I realize only one person will be damaged beyond repair if he dies is- me! I'm so sorry,' I whisper. I lean forward and kiss him. I turn and put my lips close to him and drop my eyelids in imitation… 'He offered me sugar and wanted to know all my secrets,' I say in my best

seductive voice. His eyelashes flutter and he look at me through a haze of opiates.

‘Thought you’d be gone by now,’ he says. He tilts his forehead down to rest against mine and pulls me closer. His skin, his whole being radiates heat from being so near the fire, and I close my eyes, soaking in his warmth. I breathe in the smell of snow dampened leather and smoke and apples, the smell of all those wintry days we shared before the Tournament. I do not try to move away.

Why should I anyway? His voice drops to a whisper. ‘I love you.’

That is why…

I look at him and he gives me a sad smile. I hear all their voices. ‘You could do a lot worse.’ At this moment, it is impossible to imagine how I could do any better. The gift…it is perfect. So, when I rise on my tiptoe to kiss him, it does not seem forced at all.

My choices are simple. I can die like a quarry in the woods, or I can die here beside you no, then, or forever. ‘I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to stay right here- even if I am

not there I am in your mind and memory forever.’ Always!

Always you… Stars.

31

You- I would fight for… he said to me… I wish I could freeze that moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever.’

Because I am selfish, I am a coward, I am the kind of girl who, when she might be of use, would run to stay alive and leave those who could not follow to suffer and die. There is nothing up her to me likewise, stars

and the moon, that is all I need to see and the treetops. I am sure they see me- yet I am on my time… My feet move soundlessly across.

‘It not always that I can turn my mind off,’ I say- when I hear it snap on in my mind and I walking back in and her my boy’s voice plays softly inside. ‘Thinking about your family he said?’ he asks. Why would you ask me that- I said frantically question if I said far too much in my retrieving?

‘No,’ I admit a bit guiltily. ‘All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course.’ In the

light from below, I can see his face now, the awkward way he holds his bandaged hands. ‘I am sorry about your hands.’ ‘It doesn’t matter; you were off for a long time it seemed to me’ he says. ‘I have never- ever been a contender in these stars nevertheless.’ Why did you ask me… anyways…?

I want to die as myself, to not having them plan that too, yet this is all parts of their tournament.

There were just moments where I thought you were far out there in your thoughts or so they said too. Yet it was like you just blacked out. (That's

what I wanted them to think. overloading everything this is in my mind.) My best hope is to not humiliate myself over this… and. ‘He hesitates, all the time I said too much… like I what thief to something- tacking away from him… and got away with it- as I did them, I knew I could not say anything to him, or they would surely get it… so wrong right?

‘And what do you what to know maybe I did blackout?’ I speak. ‘I don’t know how to say it exactly. How I feel about all this- my family is grown now- I no! Only me and you-you must take

this place and be there for me- that is what I need from you.

Does that make any sense to you? I ask… I shake my head, yes and he gets it, all we have at this point is each other's as we hug our own body's feel like we are hugging. How could he die as anyone LIKEWISE, himself or as me with him- or them?

'I don't want them to change me… from the inside out. Turn me into horrid kill, which I'm not wanting to be.'

I bite my lip feeling inferior… like always in my past days of days and

times of times. While I have been ruminating on the availability of trees and looking for the love to show the way- he has been struggling with how to maintain his identity as us. His purity for me is what is driving me to keep going.

I feel you! All of you now and forever! He spoke.

32

I locked my blue eyes into him, demanding an answer- do you love me?

Yes- truly! He said- I knew in his thought that was real.

I smiled at him, sad and thrilled. Okay, be my sweetheart and kiss me on the rooftop under the stars. And we ran and did just that not caring what they said.

I will always- Then I turn and leave the roof. I spend the rest of the night slipping in and out of a dozing out, imagining the cutting remarks I will make on him to kill him out of the fact I have to in the morning of the next day. I do not want to kill this boy… I love him… cannot they see that- it is sick to me and him?

~*~

There are no rules in the arena, LIKEWISE, anthropophagy does not play well with the Bureau audience, so they tried to head it off. Just KILL! And see who stands as last- there is no timing- it could be one day or one year. It has happened.

33

The ride to me I might as well have been in a coffin lasts about half an hour before the windows blackout, suggesting that we are nearing the arena.

The flying ships overhand the lands of Zarnesboro, and I go back to

the ranking, only this time it leads down into a cylinder subversive, into the catacombs that lie beneath the arena. That is where it all opened to the world, they made for us- it is part of the land yet under them workings… up and you are over the arced fizz of web almost virtual programed control-ness.

The whole thing is the brand-new to me- all- everything- the land and how it looks the sent and the air seeming thinner, a fast train moved over my head, and with clear like tracks under it with care posts under.

Fans, I would say that they want to see all this for the stadium.

The only thing the same is the faces popping up with the look of kill coming at me- there is no call out when these stars pop up and run.

34

I struggle to keep my breakfast down. We are on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard death that is gross to look at if you can slow down to see if- it has made to be that way for a tea's- lush Pandora is the fifth moon of the gas giant Polyphemus (both are figures in Greek mythology,) which

orbits Alpha Centauri A in the Alpha Centauri star system, the closest star system to our sun. Everything glassines at the light in colors you have never seen before with your eyes.

‘Why not? You saved me with those bugs. You are smart enough to still be alive. And I cannot seem to shake you anyway,’ I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. ‘You hungry?’ I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. ‘Come on then, I’ve had two kills today.’ Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. ‘I can fix your stings.’ ‘Can you?’ I ask.

‘How?’ She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I am almost certain they are the ones my mother uses. ‘Where’d you find those?’

‘Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,’ says Leah. ‘There is a lot here, too.’

‘That’s right. You are Area Eleven. Cultivation,’ I say. ‘Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you’ve got wings.’ Permitted smiles. I have landed on one of the few things she will admit pride in. ‘Well, come on, then, fix me up.’

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, LIKEWISE, it is not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh-wait.' The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It is as if the leaves are leaching the pain right out of the sting.

Permitted giggles. ‘Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you’d be a lot worse.’ ‘Do my neck! Do my cheek!’ I almost beg.

Permitted stuff another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I am laughing, because the relief is so sweet. I notice a long burn on the Permitted forearm. ‘I’ve got something for that.’ I set aside my weapons and anointed her arm with the burning medicine. ‘You have good guarantors,’ she says longingly. ‘You weren’t joking, about wanting me for an ally?’ she asks.

‘Have you gotten anything yet?’ I asked her, to shake her head- no.

‘You will, though- watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how ingenious you are.’ I turn the meat over. ‘No, I meant it,’ I say. I can almost hear Sam- groaning as I team up with this wispy child. Likewise, I want her. Because she is a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister.

‘Okay,’ she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. ‘It’s a deal.’ Of course, this kind of deal can only be

temporary, LIKEWISE, neither of us mentions that. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. Gosling has a delicious meal that is so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it. Permitted is a big handful of some starchy roots to the meal. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her Borough.

‘Oh,’ says Permitted with a sigh. ‘I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.’ I will bet she has not. I will bet meat hardly ever comes her way. ‘Take the other,’ I say.

‘Categorically?’

‘Take whatever you want. Now that I have a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus- I have snares. I can show you how to set them,’ I say. Permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. ‘Oh, take it,’ I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. ‘It will only keep a few days anyway, and we’ve got the whole bird plus the rabbit.’ Once she has hold of it,

her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful.

Her eyes widened. ‘Oh, no, we’re not allowed to eat the crops.’ ‘I’d have thought, in area 11, you’d have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,’ I say. ‘They arrest you or something?’ I asked.

‘They whip you and make everyone else watch,’ says Leah. ‘The mayor’s extremely strict about it.’

As well, our mayor, Madge’s father, does not seem to have much taste for such events. Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most laugh

at Borough in the country has its advantages. Such as, being ignored by the Bureau if we produce our coal quotas.

I can tell by her expression that it is not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping's a rare thing in quarter 14, although occasionally one occurs. Technically, Permitted and I could be whipped daily for poaching in the woods- well, technically, we could get a whole lot worse- except all the officials buy our meat.

'Do you get all the coal you want?' she asks.

‘No,’ I answer. ‘Just what we buy and whatever we track in on our boots.’

It is enigmatic, my sisterly, and terrifying. Even from orbit, the scope of flora present on the surface designates a moon brimming with life. They added more moons just to play with us- yet I know the Earth one.

Other than the richness of varying colors, the trees resemble those of Earth. They have familiar trunks, branches, and leaves, though due to the difference in gravity, many of the shapes appear strange to

humans and the proportions are greater because of the lower gravity. The trees and plant life of Zansboro have formed links to the mental connections between their roots that link to us and the troopers and effectively act as neurons, creating a moon-wide ‘brain’ that has been achieved, by the chip.

Larger than Earth it feels- this is like a tournament where you are the fighter lost in the world that made- it is not a real place to others- yet we have heard about it- like a stadium- out in this world. With what I would call

wraparound screen that never- where you can see things they say and want you to do- was it never- ever seem to end- where you are all lost within- where you feel this is all real- yet the bloodshed is for actual.

You are just one small pixel in a big sea of gaming and entertainment. Looks like a lush paradise standard during the day, LIKEWISE, at night, virtually all life on the moon exhibits bioluminescent qualities in various shades of blue, purple, and green, which provides them better camouflage at night on Zarnsboro. I can see

nothing, after running fast and far I run to a steep downward slope or even cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse piney woods.

Run- run- run… for what I thought was forever.

I hear his instructions in my head. ‘Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water also now I need to clean it.’

I heard in my mind Jump- I am not far behind you… so I did into the water I want. Swimming over I stopped, and made a fire, I had to with it now

night and dropping off down to 32° when just five or so minutes ago it was 99° Fahrenheit. I see him running for me- the lip was made- over the high falls- where a wolf was chasing him- that did not make the jump.

35

Zoie- ‘I once told you- if one gets out it’s a victory-’

Melisa- She said that to me also when I said how do I when or getaway. So-o in other words, we all could die, and no one would give a shit.

Nevertheless, it is tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I do not get it, someone else will. That the Career tries LIKEWISE, who survives the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. That is mine, I think. It is meant for me.

I am fast… I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school

although a couple can beat me in distance races. LIKEWISE, this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it; I know I can reach it first, LIKEWISE, then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I have scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and one or two I might be able to pick off, LIKEWISE, say there's a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their powerful fists.

The hijacking I call it- before the tournament, some tried to run get a train that was passing in the night- others- I remember and had played in my mind the one that ran- that tried escaping on the rail line. What they did was tunnel their way out- making a hole in the boxcar, and dripping their body down on the ties, feet dragging on and the cars would all pass LIKEWISE, the last was they had to roll over the tracks in-between the wheels. In the car Jarrah- said let us see that rope- the rope is something we all have it is so needed. Even if just one of these bracelets… cute the girl said when she

was trying to strangle another girl out like she was a guard… on the top of the tram… Do you have a better plane than a girl? Yes- let us see the rope- it when around her neck as he made two notes- there the notes there smash the joints in nick- dead in 15 seconds. They did it they killed all the troopers on top of the train- and made the drive or the train go an alternative way off to freedom or so they thought.

Over the tallest viaduct in the world 3,000 feet (about the height of the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world) in the air- they got rid of all

the bodies… the one boy rolling his eyes were not there uniform, like the rest of them that could. Planes were flown into bomb or gunned down the runners as they go for a small-town call Knox in Italy for freedom on the Kane line bypass. They fired back LIKEWISE; it was 100 of them over 3,000 of them.

~*~

Rip out of my thought- Get the weapon he said- that was the next part making it to where they have my stuff. And that was 5,280 feet (about half the height of Mount St. Helens) always. From the starting line. Where we all

must meet up- yet that the tournament- no we must get this with them about to kill with bare hands.

The very weapon that might be my salvation, I have small hands- I no- yet with her past training in my mind I have the power. And with this rope I killed my first eight-year-old girl- that was looking at me for trust- I lied saying I would not do that to her- yet this is a tournament of life or death, not trust- she was going to kill me- remember that… did I want to NO- did I have to yes. She was so cute- I made sure that she remembered… giving her

the moment in my mind that played in all the minds around in the land that I made the kill- a sacrifice of life so we can live.

(Thank you for your blood- and breath- now it is mine to have. Not-forgotten, the crowd makes their hand moment- like a wave then placing it on their heart and kissing her goodbye. These are what are area dose anyway.) We will not peace here not fighting yet some parts are an uprising, and that where you get wiped off the planet.

And I only see one bow on her, and I get it- yet I can do that as I make

my way to the point, of the Permitted first phase- of this long drawn out tournament- I know the minute must be almost up for me to get what I want from her and will have to decide what my strategy will be, right to make- to get there I am off my path now I know after the fight this girl off me… running and playing cat and mouse with her… and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the stir rounding forests toward the falls, I hope that is right to get back to where I started.

Yet, I know I will run into all of them that may have their shit now- so

what do- I do- run without? I also have now a small thumb handgun, pink with a white grip- something I keep from her forever, I knew if I win that would be something I would treasure- I undressed her seeing what I could find- it what you do when you get a kill- down in her undies in the front was this gun, deep up in her vajayjay the hand was out some point downward, and I tore it out and now have it in my handbag- good hiding spot why didn't I think of that? And one round in the gun. I wonder if that is meant for my head.

Is it a choice, no? She did care if it when off inside her why would she? So, you pack things where you have the holes… on the thing, girls have over the boys. Now I need a knife to see what shoved up their guts for that end- we- no. I know they have this investigated- yet if you have the money, you can pack hidden things like that there… I do not have the money. A hidden gun in the puss- puss- they all say wow or something like that- they went nuts at how clever that was- the reporter said- not good enough if you cannot fire it the man said on the screen, or the other girl would have been dead. How

that girl is living is hard for me to get… to John Sha-Long to Steven Hung-dong. We like that girl did not we said Steven a real cutie- what was her last name Hard-cock? No- Sharcock- yah that it- Yah-ha Sharcock- she was a cute one with dr-a-ck, yet some roses tints look to her hair in the sunlight- and green eyes- not blue- and so not brown like the others. With a thin look.

I know I must kill a week girl to get more than is the next one, I am weak I know it killing this young girl, I never thought I would be able to do such a thing.

When suddenly I notice my boy on his way, he is about five-run boys look for what I am, the shit we need- to not die- to my right I see one wanting to jump me, and he did- my boy slit his hand off- quite a fair distance I see more, still I can tell he is looking at me or my man, and I think he might be shaking his head at what my man did for me- after killing the other girl, they, he may have liked before all this took place.

The one he wanted- if he wins… Likewise, the suns in my eyes and I see nothing LIKEWISE, my man

loving eyes in mine I feel safe if only for that moment and the moment was gone to fast, and while I am perplexing over it the gong rings out. I was no at this point given his ring- something he said I need to prove to him, and what I said to him also- and that was killing a child- to show that would never betray one- another and the other way around- we killed each other now- where have the promise- a band to show for it. it mine must rock hearts in it with our names- and it is gold, he is just a gold band with our names. Yong, I went like a woman now- yet I have not even had my first period, and there are making

that happen tonight. Like all the other girls- to be as they call it far- in a tournament that not.

More blood funny, no?

36

And I have missed it the rounds to my heart and hand! I have missed it by not much!

Because that extra couple of seconds, I have lost by seeing my dream of living in the days to come- by not being ready… for all this… I need to eat… so I grab him, and we both shuffle our feet for a moment, confused at the

direction my brain wants to take… of what is next, and then he swipes me off my forward in his arms, tucking the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread that was tucked in my top I eat as he runs in the woods, and I feed him some to bits and pieces.

The pickings are so small, and I am so angry with my boy for distracting me that I sprinted in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I cannot stand living with anything.

A boy, I think from Area 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do

and for a brief time we grapple with it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood.

I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That is when I see the knife in his back. Already others- LIKEWISE, have reached Copiousness and are spreading out to attack.

Yes, the girl from Area 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I have seen her throw in training. She never misses. And I am her next target.

I was right they now have more than me… what to do… All the general fear I have been feeling condenses into an immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me in seconds.

Arena shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head.

The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow- I know the girl will not pursue me. That she

will be drawn back into Copiousness before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. Thanks for the knife, I think.

At the edge of the woods, I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so try LIKEWISE, are riding out away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground.

Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other try LIKEWISE, then slow into

a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternated between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I could between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with the boy from Borough 7 LIKEWISE, managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve, and so as I walk- I fold it effortlessly and tuck it into a pocket.

I also free the knife- it is a fine one with a long sharp blade, saw-like near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things- and slide it into my belt.

I do not dare stop observing the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go for a long time. I know that from my days in the woods.

Nevertheless, I will need water. Instruction in my mind was given, and since I botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck… I have other than his love.

The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a diversity of trees, some I identified, some completely foreign to me. At one

point, I heard a noise and pulled my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, LIKEWISE, I have only startled a rabbit- that I got my using an aero.

'Good to see you,' I whispered… If there is one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared.

The ground declines down some as you can see here. I do not particularly like this too much. Gorges make me feel trapped as I look up at the viaduct and nowhere, I am now at or so I think. I want to be high, like in the hills around Area 14, where I can

see my rivals' forthcoming. However, I have no choice LIKEWISE, to keep going running like a hillbilly-hell.

Funny though, I do not feel too bad.

The days of guzzling with the coffin paid off. I have staying power even though I am short on sleep though I feel it. I feel him going in and out on me too in my mind. Being in the woods is refreshing. I am glad for the loneliness, even though it is a misapprehension, because I am on-screen right now.

I feel it not looking cute LIKEWISE, yet sweet to them looking at how to sleep the little one is… the joke made about tucking me and giving me a bedtime story.

Not unswervingly LIKEWISE, off and on. There are so many decreases to show the first day, down to 60- that honor for the stars still standing- hiking through the woods is not much to look at in the day LIKEWISE, at night it is who-o-Wah.

Even so, they will show me enough to let individuals know I am alive, intact, and on the travel. One of

the substantial days of betting is the opening when the initial wounded come in. Conversely, that cannot compare to what happens as the field shrinks to a handful of players.

It is late-night and the ground is a wondrous sight when I begin to hear the cannons. Each shot represents a dead try LIKEWISE. The fighting must have finally stopped at Copiousness. They never- ever assemble the massacre bodies until the killers have isolated.

On an opening day, they do not even fire the cannons until the initial

fighting’s over for the motive that it is too hard to keep track of the death toll.

I allow myself to pause, panting, wheezing, and puffing as I count the shots.

One, two, and three… on and on until they reach eleven. Eleven dead in all 59 stands. All the names I could care less about there just kill me… My fingernails scrape at the dried blood the boy from Area 5 coughed into my face I got him some on the hand too. He is gone, certainly. I wonder about him and where he is off too, I can hear him yet not see.

Has he lasted through the day at least I knew that? I well no in a few hours what next- if there are any more surprises, they made up fast for us to endure as they did with having wild wolf after us… and big cats. I knew I had to find a place to sleep that would be safe in an open field with a fire ring around me- that would keep everything away, no? If I am the one inside feeding the flames- I knew not for long yet I need some shut-eye. Some are in caves- yet I do not want their batshit virus. No thanks… When they hologram the dead's images into the sky for the rest of us to see, and on our bracelets…

He had no confidence he could win. And I will not end up with the unpleasant task of killing him. It is better if he is out of this for good, I do not know all I know is this is killing me too.

I got to the point where I go my gear… all the things that were my dad's or passed in the family down for this moment. There was in a lockbox that I had to crack also… just part of the tournament to them, as you have some kid breathing down your neck, wanting to kill you- I was playing with the combo.

One eye on the lock and one-off to all the other sides, I was frantic… yet the combo was my great granddad's ID number- something that was deep in my mind that I knew I had. I tried all the family members, and that one worked, there was one can of dog food too- yet I know I will eat anything… that what they gave me… to live on. Comparable to a mutt…?

I slump down next to my backpack, dog- tired- with the meet of three of them…

I will eat anything… I need to go through it anyway before night falls.

See what I must work with. As I unhook the straps, I can feel it has sturdily made although an unfortunate color. This orange will practically glow in the dark. I make a mental note to camouflage it first thing tomorrow.

I flip open the flap. What I want most, right at this moment, is water. A girl that wanted to play nice directive to immediately find water was not arbitrary- I was going to do the same play nice until they turned one another on.

I will not last long without it, and she knows the way or so I will

trust. It may be a trap- yet I go for it- the thought in my mind said she okay- I will be there too.

It is a trap- I see 10 run up on me and I load the gun- popping them all off in the head, her first, stopping to reload the gun with black powder, the last one I say her eye color she was that close. Yet I got them all… the knives, that were thrown at me not all missing me, the arrows fly past, yet I dodge them as I am behind a tree.

49- I see all of them that have passed by my hands- I was happy- and rewarded for my bravery. They added

metal to my uniform sent in by the unmanned drone of a bluebird square under it are pin-like thing hanging out of all that I killed off with their colors. I have 14 deaths now- that I have claimed, all the names I do not even know- nor did they know me or do anything to me for them to pass on.

The number went down more- as the update when up down to 20 kids. 15 boys and 5 girls… with me included.

Now the real tournament starts to me- as the blood drips from my teeth I giggled crazily… wanting to win this no matter what! Ha- ha I can do this- as

I rip the raw meet with my k-9-teeth that I shared with a fingernail fill, that I found in one of the girl’s handbags, I have all these things now that I want the rest, I let behind with their naked bodies- for something to find and eat.

I killed boys- I never thought they all would be so different… and something I would not understand. Yet I had to do it! I used them… and I got them to fall for me in every way I could. It is all part of the star tournament for a girl!

37

For a few days, I will be able to function with unpleasant symptoms of dehydration and the runs, LIKEWISE, after that I will deteriorate into helplessness and be dead in a week, tops. I carefully laid out the provisions and flamed what I could. I am down to 60 pounds. It has been three weeks now… my mind is spinning with what if. He is a week somewhere… lost he would not say… all I heard was go one and do this.

Nothing to sleep on LIKEWISE, the ground and piled up pin tree limbs.

The bottle- the water of another girl, that I am not sure about, I added bleach I found of another dead boy body 16 drops, and I can, have it? I was out at this point- run and always moving in the night- and the day resting some… if there asleep like the animals that are when I move. And pop them in the head will they dream of banging me off. I got one last night that way and it feels so-o good!

I got his tighties underwire and made a white flag out of them hanging now on a stick, for them all to see on the screen of his giving up, that was an

easy kill to make… and I wanted to be a dick about it… for he did not have much of one. I would no… my boy is the man here! I hope he is all good.

I developed an awareness of the dryness in my throat and mouth, the cracks in my lips. I have been moving all day long. It has been hot, and I have sweated a lot and I know that is not good. Yet that is not stopping the boys from making their way at me… I can fight all of them all- I thought, or can I?

38

As I refill my pack- I have an awful thought. The lake, I have made it there- over high wood rope passageways and train, replying down the sides of rock faces, I did it all, The Kamahi Lake is a full day’s journey from where I sit now, a much harder journey with nothing to drink for you can drink this with all that is in it. And then, even if I reach it, it is sure to be heavily guarded by some of the Career stars.

I am about to panic when I remember the rabbit I got earlier today. It must drink, too, or I must eat

it without- cocking. I just must find out where- he is… that is all I can think about at this point is him.

4 weeks now- Dusk is closing in and I am ill at ease. The trees are too thin to offer much camouflage. The layer of pine needles that muffles my footsteps also makes tracking animals harder when I need their trails to find water. And I am still heading downhill, deeper, and deeper into a valley that seems endless, my dress looks like Swiss cheese at this point all dirty and such, no underwear at this point it was used as cordage. Like my shoestrings…

I am hungry, too, LIKEWISE, I do not dare break into my precious store of crackers and beef yet. Instead, I take my knife and go to work on a pine tree, cutting away the outer bark and scraping off a large handful of the softer inner bark. I slowly chew the stuff as I walk along. After a week of the finest food in the world, it is a little hard to choke down. Then I have eaten plenty of pine in my life. I will adjust quickly and do not think about it.

In another hour, it is clear I must find a place to camp yet again. Night creatures are coming out and up

inside my girlie-ness gross. I can hear the infrequent hoot or howl; my first clue is that I will be competing with natural predators for rabbits. As to whether I will be viewed as a source of food, it is too soon to tell. There could be any number of animals pestering me at this instant.

Nonetheless, right now, I decided to make my fellow stars a priority. I am sure many will continue hunting through the night.

Those who fought it out at the lavishness will have food, an abundance of water from the lake, torches or

flashlights, and weapons they are itching to use. I can only hope I have travelled far and fast enough to be out of choice.

Before settling down, I take my wire and set two twitch-up snares in the brush. I know it is risky to be setting traps, LIKEWISE, food will go so fast out here. And I cannot set snares on the run. Still, I walk another five minutes before making camp.

I pick my tree carefully, a willow, not tall LIKEWISE, set in a clump of other willows, and camouflage in those long, flowing tresses. I hiked

up, sticking to the stronger branches close to the trunk, and found a sturdy fork for my bed. It takes some doing, then again, I arrange the sleeping bag in a comfortable manner. I found the bag of one of the girls I killed number 2 on my line up.

I am small enough to tuck the top of the bag over my head, LIKEWISE, I put on my hood as well. As night falls, the air cools quickly. In the face of the risk, I took in getting the backpack, I know now it was the right choice. It is all about choosing what do you pick. What would you do like me?

I place my backpack at the foot of the bag, then slide in after it. As a precaution, I remove my belt, loop it around the division and my sleeping bag, and refasten it at my waist. Now if I roll over in my sleep, I will not go crashing to the earth.

Nightfall has just come when I hear the anthem that precedes the death summary. Through the branches, I can see the seal of the Bureau, which appears to be floating in the atmosphere.

I am viewing another screen, an enormous one that is transported by one of their disappearing hovercrafts.

This sleeping bag, radiating back and preserving my body heat, will be energetic.

I am sure there are several other stars whose major anxiety right now is how to stay warm whereas I may be able to get a few hours of sleep.

If only I was not so desired of all that is life.

The anthem fades out and the sky goes dark for a moment. At home,

we would be watching full coverage of every killing, LIKEWISE, that is thought to give a one-sided gain to the living others.

LIKEWISE, now instead of scores, they post only Borough numbers. I take a deep breath as the face of the all-dead kids begin and tick them off one by one on my fingers.

For the occasion, if I got my hands on the bow and shot someone, my secret would be revealed to all. No, here in the arena, all we see is the same snapshot they showed when they televised our training scores. Simple

headshots. Yet this time with a star saying they have fallen.

39

The first to see is the girl from Borough 2. That means that the career stars from 1 and 2 have all endured. No astonishment there. Then the boy from 3, I did not presume that one, usually all the vocations make it through the first day. The boy from Borough-

3. I guess-

The scary-faced girl made it. Both try LIKEWISE, between 4 and 7. The boy from 8. From 10. Yes, there is

the boy who I fought for the backpack. I have run through my fingers, only one deader try LIKEWISE, to go. Is it him? No, there is the girl from borough 12. That is, it, the Bureau closure is back with a final musical exaggeration. Then obscurity and the sounds of the timberland pick up where it left off.

I am thankful my man is still flourishing and not dead or messed up in the head. I tell myself again that if I get killed, his winning will be a big advantage to his mother the most, for he is a lot like me. This is what I tell myself to clarify the self-contradictory

sentiments, which ascend when I think of him all the time. When I not with him I touch myself like I want him to touch me. I think of you…

The gratitude that he gave me an edge by professing his love for me in the interview. The dread that we may come face-to-face at any moment in this arena. I know what I may have to do… Yet I will not and never will him even if we hear them say someone KILL- KILL- KILL.

5 not dead, LIKEWISE, none from Area 14. I try to work out who is left. A bonnie boy made it through the

first day. I cannot help feeling glad. That makes ten of us. The other three I will figure out tomorrow. Now when it is dark, and I have traveled far, and I am nestled high in this tree, now I must try and rest I know this is good enough for now.

I have not slept in four days, and then there has been a long day's voyage into the arena. Gradually, I allow my muscles to reduce. My eyes close… The last thing I think is it is fortunate I do not snore or at least he never said that I did. I was on top of him in the tree, all snuggled.

Spur-of-the-moment! The sound of a breaking branch wakes me yet not him. I shake him up- how long have I been asleep? Four hours? Five- nine hours- too long? Yet we had lots of covers up there 500 feet in the air.

The tip of my nose is icy cold- yet I kiss him, and kip rubs my nose- and the heat of our body is keeping the child down. Break! Snap! This is not the sound of a branch under our feet, LIKEWISE, the sharp crack of one coming from a tree. Crack! Snap! I judge it to be several hundred yards to my right. Leisurely, without a sound, I

turn myself on that route. For a few minutes, there is nothing LIKEWISE, darkness and some come to blows. Then I see a flash and a small fire begins to bloom. A pair of hands warm over flames, LIKEWISE, I cannot make out more than that yet- moving fast like.

I must bite my lip not to scream every foul name, and I know at the fire maze. What are they thinking? He asked me to hold me in his arms as we got off and he leans in for the kiss and I met that the rest of the way?

A fire in all just at nightfall would have been one thing. Those who battled at the profusion, with their superior strength and surplus of supplies, could not have been near enough to spot the flames then. Likewise, then now, when they have certainly been searching the forests for hours looking for wounded or dead- the wounded are left to pass on there no help for the week. You might as well be waving a flag and shouting, ‘Come and get me!’ And here I am a stone’s throw from the biggest idiot in the Tournament. Strapped in a tree. Not daring to flee since my general location

has just been broadcast to any killer who cares. I mean, I know it is cold out here and not everybody has a sleeping bag. Likewise, then again you grit your teeth and stick it out until dawn!

I lay smoldering in my bag with his naked body on top of mine, I feel his skin so smooth- for the next couple of hours thinking that if I can get off- enough even if death is nearing us both- and just one, my nature has been to flee, not fight with him caring me out of harm. A boy that is fighting for me is what I have always dreamed about more than marriage even. I have

dreamed about that too what young girl has not- it the most important day in a girl's life- no? I could see me with him- at the end of this now.

However, this person's a hazard. Ill-advised people are dangerous. Then this one undoubtedly does not have much in the way of guns while I have this excellent knife.

The atmosphere is still dim yet sparkly with the stars overhead all twilight, LIKEWISE, I can feel the first signs of dawn approaching. I am an establishment to think us- meaning the individual whose death I am now

developing and me- we might have gone unnoticed. Then I heard it. numerous pairs of feet breaking into a run. The fire starter must have dozed off. They are on her formerly she can escape from. I know it is a girl now, I can tell by the pleading, the agonized scream that follows. Then there's laughter and compliments from several voices. Someone cries out, '13- or 12 down and 11 to go no!' Yet they are so far away from us know it may be weeks where it- will just be he and I- I wonder if I will get pregnant?

I might- with all this that we are doing, I know nothing about that yet I sure I could do that, they would still not take me out of the fight, and they would still kill him off to… so he must pull out- and have it gone on my cheeks. Would you squeeze and suck my breast right here (she pointed to where she wanted him to kiss and draw in with lips.) I asked in a moment looking up at the skies.

The sighs- she cried- saying I do not want to ever leave you- wrapped around his was- still locked into him- and his love and Mr. Winky- that what I

call that thingie. He was kissing my neck- and I was him- I think- I got a hicky somewhere on my collarbone it is black and blue. And a chapped hood- from kissing it- It is love- and they are not stopping it- NEVER- EVER! The videos we have would kick your tongue out tongue. And yes- you can see me doing that too- hold it out and show that before the goopy was gulped hard.

After all the sex- he-a being- the sweet boy- that he is LIKEWISE, a tampon in me. The string hanging there looked at me- saying- if I when this I want you- if you when this would you

say the same- YES! We cleaned off in the river in the moonlight- a naked swim- where the eyes were looking for you did not get to us. We run more than the others… about 10 miles. I do not feel all the cute looking like I do muddy and showing hair everywhere yet- love is love and you just do not care if it is.

40

‘Why not…? You saved me with those bugs. You are smart enough to still be alive. And I cannot seem to shake you anyway,’ I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. ‘You hungry?’ I can see her swallow hard, her eye

flickering to the meat. ‘Come on then, I’ve had two kills today.’ Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. ‘I can fix your stings.’ ‘Can you?’ I ask. ‘How?’ She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I am almost certain they are the ones my mother uses. ‘Where’d you find those?’

‘Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,’ says Leah. ‘There is a lot here, too.’

‘That’s right. Are you part of 11? Cultivation,’ I say. ‘Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around

the trees like you've got wings.' Permitted smiles. I have landed on one of the few things she will admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then. Fix me up.'

I notice a long burn on Leah's forearm. 'I've got something for that.' I set aside my weapons and anoint her arm with the burning medicine; she stuffs another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I am laughing because the release is so sweet.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her

mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, LIKEWISE, it is not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh.' The sound comes out of my mouth before, I can stop it. It is as if the leaves are leaching the pain right out of the sting. Permitted giggles. 'Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse.' 'Do my neck…! Do my cheek…!' I almost begging… 'You have good sponsors,' she says longingly. 'Have

you gotten anything yet?' I ask. She shakes her head. 'You will, though. Watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how clever you are.' I turn the meat over.

'You weren't joking, about wanting me for an ally?' she asks. 'No, I meant it,' I say. I can almost hear Sam-groaning as I team up with this wispy child.

Likewise, I want her. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her Borough. She says

sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. Gosling has a delicious meal that is so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it.

Because she is a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister. ‘Okay,’ she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. ‘It’s a deal.’ Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, LIKEWISE, neither of us mentions that.

She a big handful of some starchy root to the meal. Yet she so nice to me I just cannot- I can put a knife in the little sweetheart. ‘Oh,’ says she sighs heavy. ‘I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.’

I will bet she has not. I will bet meat hardly ever comes her way. ‘Take the other,’ I say.

‘Really?’ She asks.

‘Take whatever you want. Now that I have a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus, I have snares. I can show you how to set them,’ I say. Permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. ‘Oh,

take it,' I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. 'It will only keep a few days anyway, and we've got the whole bird plus the rabbit.' Once she has hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful. 'I'd have thought, in Borough Eleven, you'd have a bit more to eat than us.

You know, since you grow the food,' I say.

Permitted eyes widen big that one thing about her eyes is big. 'Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops.'

'They arrest you or something?' I ask.

‘They whip you and make everyone else watch-’ ‘The mayor’s extremely strict about it.’

‘Don’t you have to be in school?’ I ask.

‘Not during harvest. Everyone works then,’ she says.

It is interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our Borough. I wonder if the Tournament Producers are blocking out our conversation because even though the information seems harmless, they do not want people in different Boroughs

to know about one another. The suggestion is made by her- cute- but we lay out all our food to plan. She is seen most of me, LIKEWISE, I added the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She has gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries. I tentatively bite into one, and it is as good as our blackberries. Taking Permitted on as an ally seems a better choice all the time. We divide up our food supplies, so if we are separated, we will both be set for a few days. Apart from the food, permitted has a small waterskin, a homemade slingshot, and an extra pair

of socks. She also has a sharp shard of rock she uses as a knife.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. ‘You sure this is safe?’ ‘Oh, yes, we have them back home. I’ve been eating them for days,’ she says, popping a handful in her mouth. ‘I know it’s not much,’ she says as if embarrassed, ‘LIKEWISE, I had to get away from the Copiousness fast.’

‘You did exactly right,’ I say. When I spread out my gear, she gasps a little when she sees the sunglasses.

‘How did you get those?’ she asks.

‘In my pack. They have been useless so far. They don’t block the sun and they make it harder to see,’ I say with a shrug.

‘These aren’t for the sun, they’re for obscurity,’ cries Leah. ‘Sometimes, when we harvest through the night, they’ll pass out a few pairs to those of us highest in the trees. Where the torchlight does not reach. One time, this boy Martin tried to keep his pair. Hid it in his pants. They killed him on the spot.’

‘They killed a 4 boy for taking these?’ I speak.

‘Yes, and everyone knew he was no danger. Martin was not right in the head. I mean, he still acted like a three-year-old. He just wanted the glasses to play with,’ she said.

Hearing this makes me feel like Borough 14 is some sort of haven. Of course, people keep over from starvation all the time, LIKEWISE, I cannot imagine the peacekeepers murdering a simple-minded child. There is a little girl, one of the grandkids of my Grannie, who wanders around the mess-hall. She’s not right,

LIKEWISE, she is treated as a sort of pet. People toss her scraps and things.

So, they are fighting in a pack. I am not flabbergasted. Often alliances are formed in the initial stages of the Playoffs. The strong band together to hunt down the weak then, when the tension becomes too great, begin to turn on one another. I do not have to wander too hard who has made this alliance. It will be the remaining Career stars from constituencies 1, 2, and 6. Two boys and three girls. The ones who lunched together.

For a moment, I heard them read the girl for supplies. I can tell by their comments they have found nonentity good. I phenomenon if the victim is Permitted LIKEWISE, quickly dismiss the thought.

She is much too bright to be building a fire like that.

‘Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts stinking.’ I am almost certain that is the brutish boy from quarter 2. There are buzzes of assent and then, to my horror, I hear the pack heading toward me.

They do not know I am here. How could they? And I am well concealed in the clump of trees. At least while the sun stays down. Then my black sleeping bag will turn from camouflage to trouble. If they just keep moving, they will pass me and be gone in a minute.

Likewise, the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have penlights and torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the undergrowth. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe. Have they spotted me? No, not

yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere. We even had a moment where we got to slow dance under the stars and the green leaves sawing like the wind.

‘Shouldn’t we have heard an in my mind by now the callouts- or are we off for some loving- for that is what they want to see- young love?’ ‘I’d say yes… Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately- to this- she didn’t know- I want the time.’ It did not take much for them to say yes…

41

‘You can feed yourself. Can they?’ I ask.

‘They don’t need to. They have all those supplies,’ Permitted says.

‘Say they didn’t. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?’ I speak. ‘I mean, it’s the Starvation Tournament, right?’

‘LIKEWISE, Melisa, they’re not hungry,’ says Leah.

‘No, they’re not. That is the problem,’ I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that is not motivated by the need for flight and

evasion. An offensive plan. ‘I think we’re going to have to fix that, Leah.’

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes, she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no precautions.

If she had wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker jacker nest. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can win these tournaments. Likewise, since the

odds are still against either of us surviving, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I am distracted by my latest idea about Careers and their supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I am sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle. Traditionally, the Career's strategy is to get hold of all the food early on and work from there. The years when they have not protected it well- one year a pack of hideous reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament Producers' flood washed it

away- those are usually the years that other Boroughs have won.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is to their disadvantage, because they do not know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted, and I do.

Likewise, I am too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the

first time, how very lonely I have been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it is the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, LIKEWISE, there are not any.

‘Who do you think that was?’ I cannot help thinking of my boy. ‘I don’t know.’ ‘It could have been any of the others,’ says Leah. ‘We’ll know tonight.’

‘Who’s left again?’ I ask.

‘The boy from Borough One. From Two. The boy from Three. Thresh and me. And you and My boy,’ says Leah. ‘That’s right. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.’

There is someone else, LIKEWISE, neither of us can remember who it is.

‘I wonder how that last one died,’ says Leah.

‘No telling. Likewise, it is good for us. Death should hold the crowd for a bit. We will have time to do something before the Tournament Producers decide things have

been moving too slowly,’ I say. ‘What’s in your hands?’

‘What kind are those?’ I ask.

‘Not sure. There is a marshy area over that way. Waterbird,’ she says.

It would be nice to cook them, LIKEWISE, neither of us wants to risk a fire. My guess is the one who died today was a victim of the Careers, which means they have recovered enough to be back in the Tournament. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It is a good breakfast anywhere.

'Ready to do it?' I say, pulling on my pack.

'Do what?' says Leah, LIKEWISE she bounces up, and you can tell she is up for whatever I propose.

‘Today we take out the Careers’ food,’ I say.

‘Really? How?’ You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she is exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

‘No idea. Come on, we’ll figure out a plan while we hunt,’ I say.

We do not get much hunting done though because I am too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of- Permitted about the Careers’ base. She has only been in to spy on

them briefly, LIKEWISE, she is observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they have been leaving another, the boy from Borough 3, to watch over the supplies.

‘The boy from Borough Three?’ I ask. ‘He’s working with them?’

‘What weapons does he have?’ I ask.

‘Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of

us off with that, LIKEWISE, thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah.

'And the food's just out in the open?' I speak. She nods. 'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I could not tell what exactly,' says Leah. 'Melisa, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sister. 'Eat it!' She giggles.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.’

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a Borough where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, ‘Music.’ This all I have…

‘Music?’ I speak. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. ‘You have a lot of time for that?’

‘We sing at home. At work, too. That is why I love your pin,’ she says, pointing to the blue jay that I’ve again forgotten about.

‘You have a blue jay?’ I ask.

‘Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’ I speak.

‘I’m usually up highest, so I’m the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time.

There’s a special little song I do,’ says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. ‘And the blue jays spread it around the orchard. That is how everyone knows to knock off,’ she continues. ‘They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you can’t blame them for that.’

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. ‘Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.’

‘Oh, no,’ says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. ‘I like to see it on you. That is how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.’ She pulls a necklace woven out of grass from her shirt. On it hangs a carved wooden star. Or it is a flower. ‘It’s a good luck charm.’

‘Well, it’s worked so far,’ I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. ‘Maybe you should just stick with that.’

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she will have time for on her own. We decided to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag; in case it is not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' she asks. 'Not if I pick up

another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, permitted decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you will know I am okay, only I can't get back right away.'

'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask.

'Haven't you saw them? They've got nests everywhere,' she says. I must admit I have not noticed.

‘Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I will see you for dinner,’ I say.

Surprisingly, permitted throws her arms around me.

I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back. ‘You, too,’ I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and permitted and a baker who has

promised she will not go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once- I reach the stream, I have only to follow it effortlessly to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. I must be cautious as I move along the water though because my thoughts are preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my boy. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live?

More likely it would just burn itself out and then what? I would have achieved nothing and given them far too much information about myself.

That I was here, that I have an accomplice, that I can use the bow and arrow with correctness.

I struggle again to remember that moment over Glimmer’s body when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. Somehow, I do not think he is talking about Leah. She did not drop a nest of bugs on him.

I stay put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance. I could send a flaming arrow into the triangle easily enough, I am a good enough shot to get it through those openings in the net LIKEWISE, there is no guarantee it would catch.

There is no alternative. I am going to have to get in close and see if I cannot discover what exactly protects the supplies. I am about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my right,

I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, it is Leah, LIKEWISE, then I recognize- she is the one we could remember this morning creeping out onto the plane.

When she decides it is safe, she runs for the triangle, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that have been littered around the triangle, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot.

Then she begins to approach the triangle with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot,

teetering slightly, risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel, and lands poised on her tiptoes. LIKEWISE, she overshot slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, LIKEWISE, nothing happens. In a moment, she regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I am right about the booby trap, LIKEWISE, it is more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have

discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin.

Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to a tip-off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she is doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reached the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I do not see any others, LIKEWISE, I do notice

some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of bugs nest in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the police officers Permitted has told me about and again must admire her cleverness. It is right at the edge of the wood, LIKEWISE, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the

Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began.

When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point. Remember, I tell myself. You are the hunter now, not them.

The boy from Borough 1, Permitted and the girl from Borough 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from Borough 3. He made

almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Bureau. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with a plastic box, he is easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions.

Likewise, he must be of some value, or they would not have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Whatever medicines they found in Copiousness have been ineffective.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from Borough 3. One thing is for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. Some other factor is at play here, and I had better stay put until I figure out what it is. My

guess is the triangle is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

The possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He is pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that permitted must have set the first campfire. We had made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It is loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether the boy from Borough 3 should stay or accompany them.

‘He’s coming. We need him in the woods, and his job’s done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,’ says Leah.

‘What about Lover Boy?’ says the boy from Borough 1.

‘I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It is a miracle he has not bled to death yet. At

any rate, he is in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

'Come on,' says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Borough 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, 'When we find her, I kill her in my way, and no one interferes.'

I realize I am grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I had already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands contacted the earth? You would have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You would have thought the very ground was going to explode.

'It's mined,' I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Borough 3, where they have the

factories, where they make televisions, automobiles, and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies?

That is not the sort of weapon the Tournament Producers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally. I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted them into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down. The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, LIKEWISE, the boy from Borough 4 must have managed to reactivate them.

I have never seen anyone in the Tournament do that. I bet it came as a shock even to the Tournament Producers.

Well, hurray for the boy from-

Borough 3 for putting one over on them, LIKEWISE, what am I supposed to do now? I cannot go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that is more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It does not have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she

was at her plate, and they had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

My arm's good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? One mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Borough 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others? Thereby protecting the supplies LIKEWISE, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one of mine, I would draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There is that net, clearly strung to

deflect any such attack. Besides, what I would need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the triangle, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over

with an arrow. One contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I would just be guessing. I am genuinely thinking of trying to re-create Fox-face's trip up to the triangle in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It is a big bag, LIKEWISE, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim, the first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole.

I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples

spill to the ground and I am blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow.

Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I cannot hear them. I cannot hear anything now. Likewise, the apples must have set off enough mines,

causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down on me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction from the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the triangle. The Careers are not likely to salvage anything out of that.

I had better get out of here, I think.

They will be making a beeline for the place. Likewise, once I am on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I am dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, LIKEWISE, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, LIKEWISE, it does not.

Panic begins to set in. I cannot stay here. The flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, more at times.

Likewise, I cannot let my fear show. Positively, I am living on every screen in Pane.

So-o individuals do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists- if I did not know that it was

aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my nearness, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has made me terrified. I am glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I am biting my nails like there is no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should

help soak up the blood. I cannot walk, LIKEWISE, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I cannot get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, but it is also sure to be a long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of my sister having to watch keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I am reminded of those last few kernels that burst when My sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it just in time is an understatement. I have just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there’s Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical.

The boy from Borough 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have

declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other is poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, LIKEWISE, there is nothing. The boy from Borough 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Borough 3 only has time to turn

and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side.

It is that quick. The death of the boy from Borough 3.

The other two Careers seem to be trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, LIKEWISE, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realize, of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead.

They do not know about arrows and apples. They assume the booby

trap was faulty, LIKEWISE, that the who blew up the supplies were killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief were removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament Producers to retrieve the body of the boy from Borough 6. And they delay.

I suppose the cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must

have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Borough 3. They show the boy from Borough 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the Girl from Borough 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from Borough 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can

hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There is no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I am about to be as safe as I can be,

here at the crime scene. They think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it is a long time before I risk moving.

The first thing I do is dig out my glasses and put them on, which relaxes me a little, to have at least one of my hunter's senses working. I drink some water and wash the blood from my ear. Fearing the smell of meat will draw unwanted predators- fresh blood

is bad enough- I make a delicious meal out of the greens and roots and berries Permitted and I gathered today.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we are both alive.

I ran through the surviving on my fingers. The boy from 1, both from 2, both from 11 and 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting hot in the Bureau. They will be doing specific features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It has been a long time since Borough 14

made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Permitted said, my boy is on his way out.

Not that Permitted is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the 80th Famine Tournaments begin, Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reached for my sleeping bag before I remembered I left it with Leah. I was supposed to pick up another one, LIKEWISE, what with the mines and

all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree is not sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and pine needles. I am still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It is a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from

Borough 8 lit the fire that first night. LIKEWISE, now it is me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my

jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, LIKEWISE, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it is still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

I peer through the bushes, afraid the Careers have returned, trapping me here for an indefinite time.

No, it' she, standing in the rubble of the triangle and laughing.

She is smarter than the Careers, finding a few useful items in the ashes. A metal pot- a knife blades. I am perplexed by her amusement until I realize that with the Careers' stores eliminated, she might stand a chance. Just like the rest of us. It crosses my mind to reveal myself and enlist her as a second ally against that pack.

LIKEWISE, I rule it out.

There is something about that sly grin that makes me sure that befriending she would get me a knife in the back. With that in mind, this might be an excellent time to shoot her. Likewise, she hears something, not me, because her head turns away, toward the drop-off, and she sprints for the woods. I wait. No one, nothing shows up. Still, if she thought it was dangerous, it is time for me to get out of here, too. Besides, I am eager to tell Permitted about the triangle.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the

stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold gosling in the other, because I am famished now, and not just for leaves and berries LIKEWISE, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care of my injured ear.

Then- I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, LIKEWISE, not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in

soft mud, LIKEWISE, now they are dry in the hot sun. I have not been careful enough about my tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body and my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I have just had the gosling. Second, I will save Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it has gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there is an improvement, it is undetectable. I cannot adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balance and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes,

the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reached the site of our first meeting, I felt certain it was undisturbed. There is no sign of Leah, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd.

By now she should have returned, as it is midday. Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set- although I forgot to

check for it- last night- was the farthest from our site of all. She is just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she would hurry because I do not want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon travelling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there is nothing really for me to do LIKEWISE, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better-

Likewise, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main

thing to worry about now is keeping out the infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It is not going to last long in this hot sun, LIKEWISE, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she just shows up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated LIKEWISE, still tender.

Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and the remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, LIKEWISE, without satisfactory results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I am going to have what we call a hollow day back in Borough 12. That is a day where no matter what you put in your belly; it is never enough. Having nothing to do with LIKEWISE, sitting in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to

give into it. I have lost a lot of weight in the arena; I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling necks. That is good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it is a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Bureau. The chicken in creamy orange sauce. The cakes and pudding.

Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over- sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. This is the most relaxed I have been since I have entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I

have resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set off the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered some distance away, permitted will understand I have been here, while they will mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I am at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been artfully arranged, expertly interspersed with

tinder, LIKEWISE, it has never been lit. Permitted to set up the fire LIKEWISE, never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I spied before I blew up the supplies, and this point, she ran into trouble.

I must remind myself she is still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it. There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a

pack of predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I am almost certain she is stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree.

I think I will go hunt it down.

It is a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. LIKEWISE, nothing seems suspicious. There is no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the

ground. I stopped for just a moment when I heard it. I must click my head around to the side to be sure, LIKEWISE, there it is again. Leah's four-note tune coming out of a blue jay's mouth. The one that means she is all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead notices the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they would have taken up some other song. My eyes lift into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing

softly back, hoping she will know it is safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that is when I hear the scream.

It is a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there is no one in the arena capable of making that sound except for Leah. And now I am running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, LIKEWISE, I cannot help myself. There is another high-pitched cry, this time my name. 'Melisa! Melisa!'

‘Leah!’ I shout back, so she knows I am nearby. So, they know I am near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with bug and gotten an eleven they still cannot explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. ‘Leah! I’m coming!’

When I break into the clearing, she is on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net.

She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The boy from Borough 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My

arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his blood. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, 'Are there more? Are there more?'

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shoved the boy away from her and pulled out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it is far beyond my capacity to heal, beyond anyone's.

The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There is no point in comforting words, in telling her she will be all right. She is no fool. Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it is me who is dying instead of Leah.

'You blew up the food?' she whispers.

'Every last bit,' I say.

'You have to win,' she says.

'I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now,' I promise. I hear a

cannon and lookup. It must be for the boy from Borough

1.

I hear the callouts- getting more gleesome- I do not want this for her- one boy was cut into 2 and hung my- a- oh- e- his head in a tree. One hand half his face blows off yet is still going… and a girl killed herself by sticking a long knife in her LIKEWISE, hole and going up in the front, she bloods out- slowly.

She was F-ed by a man she was not ever wanting to be with- she contracted his diseases, so she ended

it. This tournament is too dirty for protection. I have the window to show you it was hardcore- from the backside- I would never hit it that hard. (See this… he holds up his hand and the hologram play- of them doing this for 3 mins.) ‘I said she’s dead! Looking over his shoulder.’ I lay back down- and we started rolling around- I did want this to be known- yet it was- she has her off- by my call. So, they can get to see what they want to see- young love- in the making and make it.

‘Love it die in the arms of the one you care about!’

(One month passes)

The love is over, and they said we must part- so we did- it was not good for him- not back for that is what they wanted to see I get a glimpse of him, lit by a torch, his garth, heading back to the girl by the fire- he was hanging with her- not love LIKEWISE, for food. He needs me to take care of him- and I three weeks now.

His face is swollen with a black eye, there is a bloody bandage on one arm and his adulthood tested in ways you would not get, and from the sound

of his gait, he is limping for he has gashes. (He is my Bitch at this point.)

All right, I can stomach that seeing him in just underwire. Seeing all those supplies was tempting. LIKEWISE, this other thing. No one from area 14 would think of doing such a thing! As me helping him live- they all want death- yet not all the younger girls get it- the man does not. Career others are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, LIKEWISE, only because they are the Bureau's yes man.

Generally, solidly hated by all LIKEWISE, those from their Boroughs.

I can imagine the things they are saying about him back home now. And my man had the nerve to talk to me about humiliation?

Noticeably, the noble boy on the rooftop was playing just one more tournament with me. Likewise, this will be his last. I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death if I do not kill him first myself. The Career stars are soundless until he gets out of earshot, then use muted voices. ‘Why-don’t we just assassinate him now and get it over with?’ A pack of girls said- it was the girl’s agent’s boys at this point.

They did not like that were still hooking- up ‘Let him tag along would be dead at the edge of a knife. So, killing them off would be the best- what is the harm- for doing it all? And he’s handy with that knife.’ Is he- no cut? That is news- some girls loved it. What a lot of interesting things I am learning about my man today, when I unwrapped his bandages- this is what that girl did to you?

42

My bow! My arrows! Just the sight of them makes me so angry I want to scream at myself, at that traitor my

boy for distracting me from having them. I try to make eye contact with him now, LIKEWISE, he seems to be intentionally avoiding my gaze as he polishes his knife with the edge of his shirt.

'No,' says Leah, pushing away the bow. 'I'll do better with my sword.' I can see the weapon, a short, heavy blade on his belt.

I give Permitted time to hoist himself into the tree before I begin to climb again. Gale always says I remind him of a squirrel the way I can scurry up even the slenderest limb. Part of it is

my weight, LIKEWISE, part of its practice. I am another thirty feet in the air when I hear the crack and look down to see Permitted flailing as he and a branch go down. He hits the ground hard, and I am hoping he breaks his neck when he gets back to his feet, swearing like a friend. You must know where to place your hands and feet.

The girl with the arrows, Glimmer I hear someone call her- ugh, the names the people in Borough 1 give their children are so ridiculous- anyway twinkle scales, the tree until the

branches begin to crack under her feet and then has the good sense to stop. I am at least eighty-seven high now. She tries to shoot me, and it is immediately evident that she is incompetent with a bow. One of the arrows gets lodged in the tree near me though and I can seize it. I wave it teasingly above her head as if this were the sole purpose of retrieving it when I mean to use it if I ever get the chance. I could kill them, every one of them if those silver weapons were in my hands.

The Careers regroup on the ground, and I can hear them growling

conspiratorially among themselves, furious I have made them look foolish. Likewise, twilight has arrived and their window of an attack on me is closing. Finally, I hear my boy say harshly, ‘Oh, let her stay up there. It is not like she is going anywhere. We’ll deal with her in the morning.’

Well, he is right about one thing. I am going nowhere. All the relief from the pool water has gone, leaving me to feel the full potency of my burns. I scoot down a fork in the tree and clumsily prepare for bed. I put on my jacket and layout my sleeping bed. Belt

me in and try to keep from moaning. The heat of the bag’s too much for my leg. I cut a slash in the fabric and hang my calf out in the open air. I drizzle water on the wound, my hands, and do what I need to sleep.

All my bravado is gone. I am weak from pain and Hunger LIKEWISE, cannot bring myself to eat. Even if I can last the night, what will the morning bring?

I stare into the foliage trying to well- myself to rest, LIKEWISE, the burns forbid it. Birds are settling down

for the night, singing lullabies to their young.

Night creatures emerge. An owl hoots. The faint scent of a skunk cuts through the smoke.

The eyes of some animal peer at me from the neighboring tree- a possum maybe- catching the firelight from the Careers' torches. Suddenly, I am up on one elbow. Those are no possum's eyes; I know their glassy reflection too well. Those are not animal eyes at all. In the last dim rays of light, I make her out, watching me

silently from between the branches. Leah… they killed her…

How long has she been here? The whole time. Still and unobserved as the action unfolded beneath her. She headed up her tree shortly before I did, hearing the pack was so close.

For a while, we held each other’s stare. Then, without even rustling a leaf, her little hand slides into the open and points to something above my head. Low was our way of thinking about the day- I wanted to make him happy so I sucked him off as he did me. I love it is not like it was

where get sick of one another at this point yet the caring and need is there, he is my love. I need to make him happy- and me doing this is one way, and him sucking my clit, and licking my come up is doing the same for me now. The genital pulling and flicking on it just makes all the other shit go away, as I wiggle with his tackles.

Rondha- ‘She might have. It seemed simple-minded to me. Every time I think about her spinning around in that dress, I want to vomit.’ ‘Wish we knew how she got that eleven.’ ‘Bet you Lover Boy knows what I did.’ The sound

of him returning silences them. I said- Would you stop flapping that thing is all blue and silicone- it what she uses in the night, she brought it along it was in the whole time- now it a weapon in my face, ow-e-aha!

I hope she washed it!! Why is she having one and I never did? Hum?

Moving on- The Career pack sets off at a run just as dawn begins to break, and birdsong fills the air. I remain in my awkward position, muscles trembling with exertion for a while longer, then hoist myself back onto my branch.

I need to get down, to get going, LIKEWISE, for a moment I lie there, digesting what I have heard. Not only is my boy with the Careers, but he is also helping them find me. The simple-minded girl who must be taken seriously because of her eleven.

Because she can use a bow and arrow. Which my boy knows better than anyone.

Likewise, he has not told them yet. Is he saving that information because he knows it is all that keeps him alive? Is he still pretending to love me for the audience? What is going on

in his head I can hear this… and it makes me giggle…

Suddenly, the birds fall silent. Then one gives a high-pitched warning call. A single note. Just like the one Ja Permitted and I heard when the blond-headed girl was caught. High above the dying campfire, a

hovercraft materializes. A set of huge metal teeth drops down.

Slowly, gently, the dead girl that is my dad’s friend's daughter is lifted into the hovercraft back out of the fight for she had the money no- to

move else were. Then it vanishes. The birds resume their song.

‘Move,’ I whisper to myself. I wriggle out of my sleeping bag, roll it up, and place it in the pack. I take a deep breath. While I have been concealed by twilight, and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground; I am guaranteed a close-up.

The audience will have been beside themselves, knowing I was in

the tree, that I overheard the Careers talking, that I discovered my boy was with them. Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I would better at least act on top of things.

Not puzzled… Certainly not mixed up or frightened. No, I need to look one step ahead of the tournament. So, as I slide out of the foliage and into the dawn light, I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I ‘cock’ my head slightly- as I do with, I suck him off down there- all flirty-looking up with roll blue- cute wet eyes, to the side and give a knowing smile.

I am about to take off when I think of my snares. It is imprudent to check them with others so close. Likewise, must. Too many years of hunting, I guess. And the lure of meathead's rewarded with one fine rabbit. In no time, I have cleaned and gutted the animal, leaving the head, feet, tail, skin, and innards, under a pile of leaves. I am wishing for a fire-eating raw rabbit that can give you rabbit fever, a lesson I learned the hard way- when I think of the dead LIKEWISE. I hurried back to her camp. Sure enough, the coals of her dying fire are still hot. I

cut up the rabbit, fashion a spit out of branches, and set it over the coals.

I am glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I am a good bet because I will not be lured into traps as easily as the others will by Starvation. While the rabbit cooks, I grind up part of a charred branch and set about camouflaging my orange pack. The black tones it down, LIKEWISE, I feel a layer of mud would help. Of course, to have mud, I would need water.

I pull on my gear, grab my spit, kick some dirt over the coals, and take

off in the opposite direction the Careers went. I eat half the rabbit as I go, then wrap up the leftovers in my plastic for later. The meat stops the grumbling in my stomach LIKEWISE, do little to quench my thirst.

Water is my top priority now.

As I hike along, I feel certain I am still holding the screen in the Bureau, so I am careful to continue to hide my emotions. Likewise, what an enjoyable time Claudius Temple-Smith must be having with his guest commentators, dissecting my boy's conduct, my reaction. What to make of

it all? Has my boy revealed his Permitted colors? How does this affect the betting odds? Will we lose sponsors? Do we even have sponsors? Of course, I feel certain we do, or at least did.

Certainly, my boy has thrown a wrench into our star-crossed lover dynamic.

Or has he- he did all I asked… and it was good- maybe since he has not spoken much about me, we can still get some mileage out of it. Individuals will think it is something we plotted

together if I seem to like it amuses me now.

My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the greenery above me. At the earliest, I have no idea what she is pointing to, LIKEWISE, then, about 20 feet up there, I make out the vague shape in the dimming light. Some sort of animal? It appears around the size of a raccoon, LIKEWISE, it hangs from the bottom of a branch, swaying ever so slightly. There is something else. Among the familiar evening sounds of the woods, my ears register a low hum. Then I know.

It is a wasp nest.

Fear shoots through me, LIKEWISE, I have enough sense to keep still. I do not know what kind of wasp lives there. It could be the ordinary leave-us-alone-and we will-leave you alone type.

Likewise, these are the Star Tournament, and ordinary is not the norm. More likely they will be one of the Bureau's mutations, tracker jacker's. Like the jabber-jays, these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the Boroughs during the war.

Larger than regular wasps, they have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact. Most people cannot tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once. If you live, the hallucinations brought on by the venom have driven people to madness. And there is another thing, these wasps will hunt down anyone who disturbs their nest and attempt to kill them. That is where the tracker part of the name comes from.

After the war, the Bureau destroyed all the nests surrounding

their city, LIKEWISE, the ones near the Boroughs were left untouched. Another reminder of our weakness, I suppose, just like the Starvation Tournament. Another reason to keep inside the fence of Borough 12. When Gale and I come across a tracker jacket nest, we immediately head in the opposite direction.

So, is that what hangs above me? I look back to Permitted for help, LIKEWISE, she is melted into her tree.

Given my circumstances, I guess it does not matter what type of wasp nest it is. I am wounded and

trapped. Darkness has given me a brief reprieve, LIKEWISE, by the time the sun rises, the Careers will have formulated a plan to kill me. There is no way they could do otherwise after I have made them look so stupid. That nest may be the sole option I have left. If I can drop it down on them, I may be able to escape. Likewise, I will risk my life in the process.

Of course, I will never be able to get in close enough to the actual nest to cut it free. I will have to saw off the branch at the trunk and send the whole thing down. The serrated portion

of my knife should be able to manage that. Likewise, can my hands? And will the vibration from the sawing raise the swarm? And what if the Careers figure out what I am doing and move their camp? That would defeat the whole purpose.

I realize that the best chance I will have to do the sawing without drawing notice will be during the anthem. That could begin at any time. I drag myself out of my bag, make sure my knife is secured in my belt, and begin to make my way up the tree. This is dangerous since the branches are

becoming precariously thin even for me, LIKEWISE, I persevere. When I reach the limb that supports the nest, the humming becomes more distinctive. Likewise, it is still oddly subdued if these are mosquitos. It is smoke, I think. It has sedated them. This was the one defense the rebels battled the wasps.

The seal of the Bureau shines above me and the anthem blares out. It is now or never, I think, and I begin to sew. Blisters burst on my right hand as I awkwardly drag the knife back and forth. Once I have a groove, the work

requires less effort LIKEWISE, it is more than I can handle. I grit my teeth and saw away occasionally glancing at the sky to register that there were no deaths today. That is all right. The audience will be seated seeing me injured and treated and the pack below me. Likewise, the anthem's running out and I am only three-quarters of the way through the wood when the music ends, the sky goes dark, and I am forced to stop.

Now what? I could finish off the job with a sense of feeling LIKEWISE, which may not be the smartest plan. If

the wasps are too groggy, if the nest catches on its way down, if I try to escape, this could all be a deadly waste of time. Better, I think, to sneak up here at dawn and send the nest into my enemies.

In the faint light of the Careers' torches, I inch back down to my fork to find the best surprise I have ever had. Sitting on my sleeping bag is a small plastic pot attached to a silver parachute. My first gift from a sponsor! Sam- must have had it sent in during the anthem. The pot easily fits in the palm of my hand. What can it be? Not

food surely. I unscrewed the lid, and I knew by the scent that it is medicine. Cautiously, I probe the surface of the ointment. The throbbing in my fingertip vanishes.

‘Oh, Sam-,’ I whisper. ‘Thank you.’

He has not abandoned me. Not leaving me to fend entirely for myself. The cost of this medicine must be astronomical. Not one LIKEWISE, many sponsors have contrived LIKEWISE, to buy this one tiny spot.

To me, it is priceless.

I dip two fingers in the jar and gently spread the balm over my calf. The effect is almost magical, erasing the pain on contact, leaving a pleasant cooling sensation behind. This is no herbal concoction that my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, its high-tech medicine brewed up in the Bureau's labs. When my calf is treated, I rub a thin layer into my hands. After wrapping the pot in the parachute, I nestle it safely away in my pack. Now that the pain has eased, it is all I can do to reposition myself in my bag before I plunge into sleep.

A bird perched just a few feet from me alerts me that a new day is dawning. In the gray morning light, I examine my hands. The medicine has transformed all the angry red patches into a soft baby-skin pink. My leg still feels inflamed, LIKEWISE, that burn was far deeper. I apply another coat of medicine and quietly pack up my gear. Whatever happens, I am going to have to move and move fast. I also make myself eat a cracker and a strip of beef and drink a few cups of water.

43

Chats- on the fly cam- And that is when I get my first clue to his whereabouts. He could not have survived without water. I know that from my first few days here. He must be hidden somewhere near a source. There is the lake, LIKEWISE, I find that an unlikely option since it is so close to the Careers' base camp. A few spring-fed pools. Likewise, you would be a sitting duck at one of those. And the stream. The one that leads from the camp Permitted and I made it down near the lake and beyond. If he stuck to the stream, he could change his location and always be near water. He

could walk in the current and erase any tracks. He might even be able to catch a fish or two.

Well, it is a place to start, anyway. To confuse my enemies' minds, I start a fire with plenty of greenwoods. Even if they think it is a ruse, I hope they will decide I am hidden somewhere near it. While I am tracking my boy.

The sun burns off the morning haze almost immediately and I can tell the day will be hotter than usual. The waters cool and pleasant on my bare feet as I head downstream. I am

tempted to call out my boy's name as I go LIKEWISE and decide against it. I will have to find him with my eyes and with one good ear or he will have to find me. Likewise, he will know I will be looking, right? He will not have so low of an opinion of me as to think I would ignore the new rule and keep to me. Would he? He is extremely hard to predict, which might be interesting under different circumstances, LIKEWISE, now only provides an extra obstacle.

Escape the stream now.

Fighting off Permitted or Thresh as I

climbed over this rocky terrain. I have about decided I am on the wrong track entirely, that a wounded boy would be unable to navigate getting to and from this water source when I see the bloody streak going down the curve of a boulder. It is long dried now, LIKEWISE, the smeary lines running side to side suggest someone- who was not fully in control of his mental faculties- tried to wipe it away.

Hugging the rocks, I move slowly in the direction of the blood, searching for him.

I find a few more bloodstains, one with a few threads of fabric glued to it, LIKEWISE, no sign of life. I break down and say his name in a hushed voice. ‘My boy! My boy!’ Then a blue jay lands on a scruffy tree and begins to mimic my tones so I stop. I give up and climb back down to the stream thinking, He must have moved on.

Somewhere farther down.

My foot had just broken the surface of the water when I heard a voice.

‘You here to finish me off, sweetheart?’

I whip around. It comes from the left, so I cannot pick it up very well. And the voice was hoarse and weak. Still, it must have been my boy. Who else in the arena would call me sweetheart? My eyes peruse the bank, LIKEWISE, there is nothing. Just mud, the plants, the base of the rocks.

‘My boy?’ I whisper. ‘Where are you?’ There is no answer. Could I just have imagined it? No, I am certain it was real and nearby, too. ‘My boy?’ I creep along the bank.

‘Well, don’t step on me.’

I jump back. His voice was right under my feet. Still, there is nothing. Then his eyes open, unmistakably blue in the brown mud and green leaves. I gasp and am rewarded with a hint of white teeth as he laughs.

It is the final word in camouflage. Forget chucking weights around. My boy should have gone into his private session with the Tournament Producers and painted himself into a tree. Or a boulder. Or a muddy bank full of weeds.

‘Close your eyes again,’ I order. He does, and his mouth too, and completely disappears. Most of what I judge to be his body is under a layer of mud and plants. His face and arms are so artfully disguised as to be invisible. I kneeled beside him. ‘I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off.’

My boy smiles. ‘Yes, frosting. The final defense of the dying.’

‘You’re not going to die,’ I tell him firmly. ‘Says who?’ His voice is so ragged. ‘Tells me. We’re on the same team now, you know,’ I tell him.

His eyes open. ‘So, I heard. Nice to find what’s left of me.’

I pulled out my water bottle and gave him a drink. ‘Did Permit cut you?’ I ask.

‘Left leg. Up high,’ he answers.

‘Let us get you in the stream, wash you off so I can see what kind of wounds you’ve got,’ I say.

‘Lean down a minute first,’ he says. ‘Need to tell you something.’ I lean over and put my good ear to his lips, which tickle as he whispers. ‘Remember, we’re madly in love, so it’s

all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it.'

I jerk my head back LIKEWISE, end up laughing.

'Thanks, I'll keep it in mind.' At least, he is still able to joke around. Likewise, when I start to help him to the stream, all the levity disappears. It is only two feet away; how hard can it be? Extremely hard when I realize he is unable to move an inch on his own. He is so weak that the best he can do is not to resist. I try to drag him, LIKEWISE, even though I know he is doing all he can to keep quiet, sharp cries of pain

escaped him. The mud and plants seem to have imprisoned him and I finally must give a gigantic tug to break him from their clutches. He is still two feet from the water, lying there, teeth gritted, tears cutting trails in the dirt on his face.

'Look, my boy, I'm going to roll you into the stream. It's very shallow here, okay?' I speak.

'Excellent,' he says.

I crouch down beside him. No matter what happens, I tell myself, do not stop until he is in the water. 'On three,' I say. 'One, two, three!' I can

only manage one full roll before I must stop because of the horrible sound he is making. Now he is on the edge of the stream. This is better anyway.

'Okay, change of plans. I'm not going to put you all the way in,' I tell him. Besides, if I get him in, who knows if I have ever been able to get him out?

'No more rolling?' He asks.

'That's all done. Let us get you cleaned up. Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?' I speak. It is hard to know where to start. He is so caked with mud and matted leaves; I cannot even see his clothes. If he is wearing

clothes. The thought makes me hesitate a moment, LIKEWISE, then I plunge in. Naked bodies are no big deal in the arena, right?

I have two water bottles and Leah's water skin. I prop them against rocks in the stream so that two are always filling while I pour the third over My boy's body. It takes a while, LIKEWISE, I finally get rid of enough mud to find his clothes. I gently unzip his jacket, and his shirt and ease them off him. His undershirt is so plastered into his wounds I must cut it away with my knife and drench him again to work

it loose. He is badly bruised with a long burn across his chest and four-tracker jacket stings if you count the one under his ear. Likewise, I feel a bit better. This much I can fix. I decided to take care of his upper body first, to alleviate some pain before I tackle whatever damage Permitted did to his leg.

Since treating his wounds seems pointless when he is lying in what has become a mud puddle, I manage to prop him up against a boulder. He sits there, uncomplaining, while I wash away all the traces of dirt from his hair and skin. His flesh is very

pale in the sunlight, and he no longer looks strong and stocky. I must dig the stingers out of his tracker jacket lumps, which causes him to wince, LIKEWISE, the minute I apply the leaves he sighs in relief. While he dries in the sun, I wash his filthy shirt and jacket and spread them over boulders.

Then I applied the burn cream to his chest. This is when I notice how hot his skin is becoming. The layer of mud and the bottles of water have disguised the fact that he is burning with fever. I dig through the first-aid kit I got from the boy from Borough 1 and

find pills that reduce your temperature. My mother breaks down and buys these on occasion when her home remedies fail.

‘Swallow these,’ I tell him, and he obediently takes the medicine. ‘You must be hungry.’

‘Not really. It’s funny, I haven’t been hungry for days,’ says My boy. When I offer him gosling, he wrinkles his nose at it and turns away. That is when I know how sick he is.

‘My boy, we need to get some food in you,’ I insist.

‘It’ll just come right back up,’ he says. The best I can do is to get him to eat a few bits of dried apple.
‘Thanks. I am much better. Can I sleep now, Melisa?’ He asks.

‘Soon,’ I promise. ‘I need to look at your leg first.’ Trying to be as gentle as I can, I remove his boots, his socks, and then very slowly inch his pants off him. I can see the tear Leah’s sword made in the fabric over his thigh, LIKEWISE, it in no way prepares me for what lies underneath. The deep inflamed gash oozing both blood and

pus. The swelling of the leg. And worst of all, the smell of festering flesh.

I want to run away. Disappear into the woods like I did that day they brought the burn victim to our house. Go and hunt while my mother and My sister attend to what I have neither the skill nor the courage to face. Likewise, there is no one here LIKEWISE, me. I try to capture the calm demeanor my mother assumes when handling particularly bad cases.

‘Pretty awful, huh?’ Says my boy.

He is watching me closely.

‘So-so.’ I shrug like it is no big deal. ‘You should see some of the people they bring my mother from the mines.’ I refrain from saying how I usually clear out of the house whenever she is treating anything worse than a cold. Come to think of it, I do not even much like to be around coughing. ‘The first thing is to clean it well.’

I have left on My boy’s undershorts because they are not in bad shape and I do not want to pull them over the swollen thigh and, all right, the idea of him being bad makes me uncomfortable. That is another

thing about my mother and my sister. Nakedness does not affect them, gives them no cause for embarrassment.

Ironically, at this point in the Tournament, my little sister would be of far more use to my boy than I am. I scoot my square of plastic under him, so I can wash down the rest of him. With each bottle I pour over him, the worse the wound looks. The rest of his lower body has fared well, just one sting and a few small burns that I treat quickly. Likewise, the gash on his leg. What can I do about that?

‘Why don’t we give it some air and then.’ I trail off. ‘And then you’ll patch it up?’ says my boy. He looks almost sorry for me as if he knows how lost I am.

‘That’s right,’ I say. ‘In the meantime, you eat these.’ I put a few dried pear halves in his hand and went back into the stream to wash the rest of his clothes. When they are flattened out and drying, I examine the contents of the first-aid kit. It is basic stuff. Bandages, fever pills, medicine to calm stomachs. Nothing of the caliber I will need to treat my boy.

‘We’re going to have to experiment some,’ I admit. I know the bugs leave to draw out infection, so I start with those. Within minutes of pressing the handful of chewed up green stuff into the wound, pus begins running down the side of his leg. I tell myself this is a good thing and bite the inside of my cheek hard because my breakfast is threatening to make a reappearance.

‘Melisa?’ My boy says. I meet his eyes, knowing my face must be some shade of green. He mouths the words. ‘How about that kiss?’

I burst out laughing because the whole thing is so revolting, I cannot stand it.

‘Something wrong?’ he asks a little too innocently.

‘I, I’m no good at this. I am not my mother. I’ve no idea what I’m doing, and I hate p-us-s,’ I say. ‘Euh!’ I allow myself to let out a groan as I rinse away the first round of leaves and apply the second. ‘Euuuh!’

‘How do you hunt?’ he asks.

‘Trust me. Killing things is much easier than this,’ I say. ‘Although

for all I know, I am killing you.' 'Can you speed it up a little?' he asks.

'No. Shut up and eat your pears,' I say.

After three applications and what seems like a bucket of pus, the wound does look better. Now that the swelling has gone down, I can see how deep Leah's sword cut.

Right down to the bone.

'What next, Dr. Everdeen?' He asks.

'Maybe I'll put some of the burn ointment on it. It helps with

infection anyway. And wrap it up?' I speak. I do and the whole thing seems a lot more manageable, covered in clean white cotton. Although, against the sterile bandage, the hem of his undershorts looks filthy and teeming with contagion. I pulled out Leah's backpack. 'Here, cover yourself with this and I'll wash your shorts.'

'Oh, I don't care if you see me,' says My boy. 'You're just like the rest of my family,' I say. 'I care, all right?' I turn my back and look at the stream until the undershorts splash into the

current. He must be feeling a bit better if he can throw.

‘You know, your- kind of squeamish for such a lethal person,’ says My boy as I beat the shorts clean between two rocks. ‘I wish I’d let you give Sam- a shower after all.’

I wrinkle my nose at the memory.

‘What’s he sent you so far?’

‘Not a thing,’ says My boy. Then there is a pause as it hits him. ‘Why, did you get something?’

Getting the broth into My boy takes an hour of coaxing, begging, threatening, and yes, kissing, LIKEWISE, finally, sip by sip, he empties the pot. I let him drift off to sleep then and attend to my own needs, wolfing down supper of gro-o-sling and roots while I watch the daily report in the sky. No new casualties. Still, my boy and I have given the audience an interesting day. Hopefully, the Tournament Producers will allow us a peaceful night.

I automatically look around for a good tree to nest in before I realize

that it is over. At least for a while. I cannot very well leave My boy unguarded on the ground. I left the scene of his last hiding place on the bank of the stream untouched- how could I conceal it? -And we are a scant fifty yards downstream. I put on my glasses, place my weapons in readiness, and settle down to keep watch.

The temperature drops rapidly and soon I am chilled to the bone. Eventually, I give in and slide into the sleeping bag with My boy. It is toasty warm, and I snuggle down gratefully

until I realize it is more than warm, it is overly hot because the bag is reflecting his fever. I check his forehead and find it burning and dry. I do not know what to do. Leave him in the bag and hope the excessive heat breaks the fever? Take him out and hope the night air cools him off? I end up just dampening a strip of bandage and placing it on his forehead. It seems weak, LIKEWISE, I am afraid to do anything too drastic.

I spent the night half-sitting, half lying next to my boy, refreshing the bandage, and trying not to dwell on the fact that by teaming up with him, I have

made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone. Tethered to the ground, on guard, with an extremely sick person to take care of. LIKEWISE, I knew he was injured. And still, I came after him. I am just going to have to trust that whatever instinct sent me to find him was a good one.

When the sky turns rosy, I notice the sheen of sweat on My boy's lip and discover the fever has broken.

He is not back to normal, LIKEWISE, it has come down a few degrees. Last night, when I was gathering vines, I came upon a bush of

Leah’s berries. I strip off the fruit and mash it up in the broth pot with chilly water.

My boy’s struggling to get up when I reach the cave. ‘I woke up and you were gone,’ he says. ‘I was worried about you.’

‘I thought Permitted and Clove might have found you. They like to hunt at night,’ he says, still serious.

‘Clove? Which one is that?’ I ask.

‘The girl from Borough Two. She’s still alive, right?’ He speaks.

‘Yes, there’s just them and us and Thresh and Neahie,’ I say. ‘That’s what I nicknamed the girl from Five. How do you feel?’

‘Better than yesterday. This is an enormous improvement over the mud,’ he says. ‘Clean clothes and medicine and a sleeping bag. and you.’

Oh, right, the whole romance thing. I reach out to touch his cheek and he catches my hand and presses it against his lips. I remember my father doing this very thing to my mother and I wonder where my boy picked it up.

Surely not from his father and the witch.

‘No more kisses for you until you’ve eaten,’ I say.

We get him propped up against the wall and he obediently swallows’ the spoonful of the berry mush I feed him. He refuses the gosling again, though. ‘You didn’t sleep,’ my boy says.

‘I’m all right,’ I say. Likewise, the truth is, I am exhausted.

‘Sleep now. I will keep watching. I’ll wake you if anything

happens,' he says. I hesitate. 'Melisa, you can't stay up forever.'

He has a point there. I will have to sleep eventually. And it is better to do it now when he seems alert, and we have daylight on our side. 'All right,' I say. 'LIKEWISE, just for a few hours. Then you wake me.'

It is too warm for the sleeping bag now. I smooth it out on the cave floor and lie down, one hand on my loaded bow in case I must shoot at a moment's notice. My boy sits beside me, leaning against the wall, his bad leg stretched out before him, his eyes

trained on the world outside. ‘Go to sleep,’ he says softly. His hand brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead. Unlike the staged kisses and caresses so far, this gesture seems natural and comforting. I do not want him to stop, and he does not. He is still stroking my hair when I fall asleep.

Too long. I sleep for too long. I know from the moment I open my eyes that we are into the afternoon. My boy’s right beside me, his position unchanged. I sit up, feeling somehow defensive LIKEWISE, better rested than I have been in days.

~*~

Everything seems to still be recovering from an attack that happened last night. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies.

Everything is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

The possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He

is pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that permitted must have set the first campfire. We had made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It is loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether the boy from Borough 3 should stay or accompany them.

‘He’s coming. We need him in the woods, and his job’s done here

anyway. No one can touch those supplies,' says Leah.

'What about Lover Boy?' says the boy from Borough 1.

'I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It is a miracle he has not bled to death yet. At any rate, he is in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

‘Come on,’ says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Borough 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, ‘When we find her, I kill her in my way, and no one interferes.’

I stay put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance.

So, I am right about the booby trap, LIKEWISE, it is more complex

than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too.

How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to a tip-off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she is doing her odd little dance back out of

the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe.

Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands contacted the earth? You would have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You would have thought the very ground was going to explode.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah’s second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have begun to suspect some sort of trick. Time is running out.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim, the first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples

spill to the ground and I am blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow. Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I cannot hear them. I cannot hear anything now. Likewise, the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I

manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down on me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction from the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the triangle. The Careers are not likely to salvage anything out of that.

I had better get out of here, I think.

They will be making a beeline for the place. Likewise, once I am on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I am dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, LIKEWISE, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, LIKEWISE, it does not.

Panic begins to set in. I cannot stay here. The flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I

place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, more at times. Likewise, I cannot let my fear show. No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I cannot walk, LIKEWISE, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively.

Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I cannot get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, but it is also sure to be a long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of my sister having to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice

more. I am reminded of those last few kernels that burst when my sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it just in time is an understatement. I have just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there’s Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical - so people do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists - if I did not know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my proximity, my inability to run or defend

myself, and in fact, the whole thing has made me terrified. I am glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I am biting my nails like there is no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

The boy from Borough 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his

anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other try LIKEWISE, is poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, LIKEWISE, there is nothing. The boy from Borough 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Borough 3 only has time to turn and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side. It is that quick. The death of the boy from Borough 3.

The other two Careers seem to be trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, LIKEWISE, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realize, of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead. They do not know about arrows and apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, LIKEWISE, that the who blew up the supplies was killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions.

The shattered remains of the thief were removed by hovercraft. They

retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament Producers to retrieve the body of the boy from Borough 3. And they wait.

I suppose the cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls- up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Borough 3. They show the boy from Borough 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know.

The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the Girl from Borough 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from Borough 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There is no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I am about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They think the bomber has a

two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it is a long time before I risk moving.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we are both alive. Both from 11 and all from 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting hot in the Bureau. They will be doing specific features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It has been a long time since Borough 12 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Permitted said, my boy was on his

way out. Not that Permitted is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the 80th Famine Tournaments begin, Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reached for my sleeping bag before I remembered I left it with Leah. I was supposed to pick up another one, LIKEWISE, what with the mines and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree is not sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with

leaves and pine needles. I am still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It is a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from Borough 8 that lit the fire that first night. LIKEWISE, now it is me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When- I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it

takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, LIKEWISE, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it is still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold

gosling in the other, because I am famished now, and not just for leaves and berries LIKEWISE, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care of my injured ear. Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, LIKEWISE, not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, LIKEWISE, now they are dry in the hot sun. I have not been careful enough about my tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine

needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body and my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I have just had the gosling. Second, I will save Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it has gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to

collect sounds. If there is an improvement, it is undetectable. I cannot adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balanced and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reached the site of our first meeting, I felt certain it had been undisturbed. There is no sign of Leah,

not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd. By now she should have returned, as it is midday.

Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set although I forgot to check for it- last night - was the farthest from our site of all. She is just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she would hurry because I do not want to hang around here too long. I want to spend

the afternoon travelling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there is nothing really for me to do LIKEWISE, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better LIKEWISE, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out the infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It is not going to last long in this hot sun, LIKEWISE, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she just shows up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated LIKEWISE, still tender. Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and the remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, LIKEWISE, without satisfactory results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I am going to have what we call a hollow day back in Borough 12. That is a day where no matter what you put in your belly; it is never enough. Having nothing to do with LIKEWISE, sitting in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to give into it. I have lost a lot of weight in the arena; I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling-

neck. That is good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it is a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Bureau. The chicken in creamy orange sauce.

The cakes and pudding. Bread with and sari. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it

tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over… sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. This is the most relaxed I have been since I have entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I have resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set off the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered some distance away, permitted will understand I have been here, while they will mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I am at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been artfully arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, LIKEWISE, it has never been lit. Permitted to set up the fire LIKEWISE, never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I

spied before I blew up the supplies, and this point, she ran into trouble.

I must remind myself she is still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it.

There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I am almost certain she is stuck out there,

somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree. I think I will go hunt it down.

It is a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. LIKEWISE, nothing seems suspicious. There is no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I stopped for just a moment when I heard it. I must crack my head around to the side to be sure, LIKEWISE, there it is again. Leah’s

four-note tune coming out of a blue jay’s mouth. The one that means she is all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead notices the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they would have taken up some other song. My eyes lift into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she will know it is safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that is when I hear the scream.

It is a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there is no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Leah. And now I am running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, LIKEWISE, I cannot help myself.

There is another high-pitched cry, this time my name.

'Melisa! Melisa!'

'Leah!' I shout back, so she knows I am nearby. So, they know I am near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with ants and gotten an

eleven they still cannot explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. ‘Leah! I’m coming!’

When I break into the clearing, she is on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net. She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The sun comes up in a wonderful way to me, in the sky, and even though the canopy seems overly bright. I coat my lips in some grease from the rabbit and try to keep from panting, LIKEWISE, it is no use. It has

only been a day and I am dehydrating fast. I try and think of everything I know about finding water. It runs downhill, so continuing down into this valley is not a sad thing. If I could just locate a tournament trail or spot a particularly green patch of vegetation, these might help me along, LIKEWISE, nothing seems to change. There is just the slight gradual slope, the birds, the sameness to the trees.

As the day wears on, I know I am headed for trouble. What little urine I have been able to pass is a deep brown, my head is aching, and there is

a dry patch on my tongue that refuses to moisten. The sun hurts my eyes, so I dig out my sunglasses, LIKEWISE, when I put them on, they do something funny to my vision, so I just stuff them back in my pack.

It is late afternoon when I think I have found it helpful. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. Likewise, just as I am holding them to my lips, I get a hard look at them. What I thought were blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are

blooded. I do not recognize these berries, they are edible, and LIKEWISE, I am guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the star makers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100% sure they were not toxic. Something I already knew, LIKEWISE, I am so thirsty it takes her reminder to give me the strength to fling them away.

Fatigue is beginning to settle on me, LIKEWISE, it is not the usual tiredness that follows a long hike. I must stop and rest frequently, although

I know the only cure for what ails me requires continued searching. I try a new tactic- climbing a tree, as high as I dare in my shaky state- to look for any signs of water.

I comply beat, I haul myself up into a tree and belt myself in. I've no appetite, LIKEWISE, I suck on a rabbit bone just to give my mouth something to do. Night falls, the anthem plays, and high in the sky, I see the picture of the girl, who was from Borough 7. The one my boy went back to finish off.

Determined to go on until nightfall, I walk until I am stumbling

over my own feet. Likewise, in any direction, there is the same unrelenting stretch of forest.

My Permitted fear is losing him- or him dying- being her for me when I need to be held,

and me being alone forever- I do not want any other boy- not from here or anywhere. My fear of the

The career pack is minor compared to my sweltering thirst. Besides, they were heading away from me and by now they, too, will have to rest.

With the scarcity of water, they may even have had to return to the lake for refills.

I need to run- that would be nice there are- a thunderstorm is not fun when you are in the mud, yet I find them thrilling, with me boy. I know I cannot get back to the river- for they are there and that not good or you will be killed off fast- so run is what I need- what we both need. That is the only course for me as well.

Morning brings distress to me, my head throbs like my clit- with every

beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints.

I should be acting with more carefulness, moving with more urgency. I fall, rather than jump from the tree. It takes several minutes for me to assemble my gear.

Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong.

44

I do not say so LIKEWISE; my boy’s words remind me of the warnings they give us about not going beyond the fence in Borough 12. I cannot help,

for a moment, comparing him with Leah, who would see that field as a potential source of food as well as a threat. Thresh certainly did. It is not that My boy's soft exactly, and he is proved he is not a coward. Likewise, there are things you do not question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Permitted questions everything. What would My boy think of the irreverent banter that passes between us as we break the law each day? Would it shock him? The things we say about Alsace. Leah's tirades against the Bureau?

‘Maybe there is a bread bush in that field,’ I say. ‘Maybe that’s why Thresh looks better fed now than when we started the Tournament.’

‘Either that or he’s got very generous sponsors,’ says My boy. ‘I wonder what we’d have to do to get Sam- to send us some bread.’

I raise my eyebrows before I remember he does not know about the message Sam- sent us a couple of nights ago. One kiss equals one pot of broth. It is not the sort of thing I can blurt out, either. To say my thoughts aloud would be tipping off to the

audience that romance has been fabricated to play on their sympathies and that would result in no food at all. Somehow, believable, I must get things back on track. Something simple to start with. I reach out and take his hand.

'Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me knock you out,' I say mischievously. 'Yeah, about that,' says My boy, entwining his fingers in mine. 'Don't try something like that again.'

'Or what?' I ask.

‘Or. or. ‘He can’t think of anything good. ‘Just give me a minute.’

‘What’s the problem?’ I say with a grin.

‘The problem is we’re both still alive. This only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing,’ says my boy.

‘I did do the right thing,’ I say.

‘No! Just do not, Melisa!’ His grip tightens, hurting my hand, and there’s real anger in his voice. ‘Don’t die for me. You will not be doing me any favors. All right?’

I am startled by his intensity LIKEWISE, recognize an excellent opportunity for getting food, so I try to keep up. ‘Maybe I did it for myself, my boy, did you ever think of that? You are not the only one who. Who worries about it? What it would be like if.’

I fumble- I am not as smooth with words as My boy.

And while I was talking, the idea of losing My boy hit me again and I realized how much I do not want him to die. And it is not about sponsors.

-And-

It is not about what will happen back home. And it is not just that I do not want to be alone. It is him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread.

‘If what, Melisa?’ she says softly.

I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Alsace. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I am feeling, it is no one’s business LIKEWISE, mine.

‘That’s exactly the kind of topic Sam- told me to avoid,’ I say evasively, although Sam- never said anything of

the kind. He is cursing me out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment. LIKEWISE, my boy somehow catches it.

'Then I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself,' he says and moves into me.

This is the first kiss that we are both fully aware of.

Neither of us hobbled by-sickness or pain or simply unconscious. Our lips are neither burning with fever nor icy cold. This is the first kiss where I feel stirring inside my chest. Warm

and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another.

Likewise, I do not get it. Well, I do get a second kiss, LIKEWISE, it is just a light one on the tip of my nose because My boy's been distracted. 'Your wound is bleeding again. Come on, lie down, it's bedtime anyway,' he says.

My socks are dry enough to wear now. I make My boy put his jacket back on. The damp cold seems to cut right down to my bones, so he must be half-frozen. I insist on taking the first watch, too, although neither of us

thinks it is anyone who will come in this weather.

Likewise, he will not agree unless I am in the bag, too, and I am shivering so hard that it is pointless to object. In stark contrast to two nights ago, when my boy was a million miles away, I am struck by his immediacy now. As we settle in, he pulls my head down to use his arm as a pillow, the other rests protectively over me even when he goes to sleep. No one has held me like this in such a long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting

my mother, no one else's arms have made me feel this safe.

With the aid of the glasses, I lie watching the drips of water splatter on the cave floor. Rhythmic and lulling. Several times, I drift off briefly and then snap awake, guilty, and angry with myself. After three or four hours, I cannot help it, I must rouse my boy because- I cannot keep my eyes open. He does not seem to mind.

'Tomorrow, when it's dry, I'll find us a place so high in the trees we can both sleep in peace,' I promise as I drift off.

Likewise, tomorrow is no better in terms of weather. The deluge continues as if the Tournament Producers are intent on washing us all away. The thunder's so powerful it shakes the ground. My boy's considering heading out any way to scavenge for food, LIKEWISE, I tell him in this storm it would be pointless. He will not be able to see three feet in front of his face and he will only end up getting soaked to the skin for his troubles.

He knows I am right, LIKEWISE, the gnawing in our stomachs is becoming painful.

Likewise, my mind seems fuddled, and forming a plan is hard. I lean back against the trunk of my tree, one finger gingerly stroking the sandpaper surface of my tongue, as I assess my options. How can I get water? Like I said, rain works- yet get bad when we are sleeping in it- yet I lay on top so- you get it if my legs or on the side, slid so in and right. He is like a bare, that I love to hug. He calls me tiny- and his girl! Hope for rain the sky

opens, and we get dumped on- yet what more thrilling the love with lighting- I far it yet it makes me cuddlier with him. Besides the no, this kisses me all over my body. Just to feel good about everything that is not.

Keep looking. Yes, this is my only chance. Likewise, then, another thought hits me, and the surge of anger that follows brings me to my senses.

It is mayhem. The Careers have woken to a full-scale nasty bug attack. My boy and a few others have the sense to drop everything and bolt. I can hear cries of ‘To the lake! To the lake!’ and

know they hope to evade the wasps by taking to the water. It must be close if they think they can outdistance the furious insects. Glimmer and another girl, the one from Borough 4, are not so lucky. They receive multiple stings before they are even out of my view. Glimmer goes completely mad, shrieking, and trying to bathe the wasps off with her bow, which is pointless. She calls others for help LIKEWISE, of course, no one returns. The girl from Borough 5- and 4 staggers out of sight, although I would not bet on her making it to the lake. I watch Glimmer fall, twitch hysterically

around on the ground for a few minutes, and then go still.

The nest is nothing LIKEWISE, an empty shell. The wasps have vanished in pursuit of the others. I do not think they will return, LIKEWISE, I do not want to risk it. I scampered down the tree and hit the ground running in the opposite direction of the lake. The poison from the stingers makes me wobbly, LIKEWISE, I find my way back to my little pool and submerge myself in the water, just in case any wasps are still on my trail. After about five minutes, I drag myself

onto the rocks. People have not exaggerated the effects of stings. The one on my knee is closer to orange than a plum in size. A foul-smelling- green-liquid- oozes- from the places where I pulled out the stingers.

A foul, rotten taste pervades my mouth, and the water has a negligible effect on it. I drag myself over to the honeysuckle bush and pluck a flower. I gently pull the stamen through the blossom and set a drop of nectar on my tongue. The sweetness spreads through my mouth, down my throat, warming my veins with

memories of summer, and my home woods, and her presence beside me. For some reason, our discussion from yesterday morning comes back to me. ‘We could do it; you know.’

‘What?’

‘Why?’

‘Leave the Borough. Runoff. Live in the woods. You and I could make it.’ Also, suddenly, I am not thinking of Leah- LIKEWISE, of my boy and. My boy! He saved my life! I think. Since the time we met up, I could not tell what real and what mistletoe venom had caused me to imagine.

Likewise, if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for?

Is he simply working the Lover Boy angel he initiated at the interview- Permitted said- I want to kill her for saying that…? Or was he trying to protect me? And if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense.

They bear no trace of the noxious green slime that came from Glimmer's body- which leads me to believe that might not have been real- LIKEWISE, they have a fair amount of dried blood on them.

I phenomenon what Permitted made of the incident for a moment and then I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason, Permitted and My boy does not exist well together in my judgments.

So, I focus on the one good thing that has happened since I landed in the arena. I have a bow and arrows! A full dozen arrows if you count the one- I retrieved in the tree. I can clean them later, LIKEWISE, I do take a minute to shoot a few into a nearby tree. They are more like the weapons in the Training Center- than my ones at

home, LIKEWISE, who cares? That I can work with.

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Tournament. I know I have tough opponents left to face. Likewise, I am no longer merely praying that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If permitted to break through the trees right now, I would not flee, I would shoot. I am anticipating the moment with pleasure.

LIKEWISE, first, I must get some strength back into my body. I am

very thirsty again and my water supply is dangerously low.

The little padding, I was able to put on by gorging myself during prep time in the Bureau is gone, plus several more pounds as well. My hip bones and ribs are more prominent than I remember them being since those awful months after my father’s death.

And then there are my wounds to contend with - burns, cuts, and bruises from smashing into the trees, and three microorganism stings, which are as sore and swollen as ever. I treat my burns with the ointment and try

dabbing a bit on my stings as well, LIKEWISE, it does not affect them.

My mother knew a treatment for them, some type of leaf that could draw out the poison, LIKEWISE, she seldom had cause to use it, and I do not even remember its name let alone its appearance.

Water first, I think. You can hunt along the way now. It is easy to see the direction I came from by the path of destruction my crazed body made through the foliage. So, I walk off in the other direction, hoping my

enemies still lie locked in the surreal world of bug venom.

I cannot move too quickly; my joints reject any abrupt motions. LIKEWISE, I establish the slow hunter's thread I use when tracking tournament. Within a few minutes, I spot a rabbit and make my first kill with the bow and arrow. It is not my usual clean shot through the eye, LIKEWISE, I will take it.

After about an hour, I find a stream, shallow LIKEWISE, wide, and more than sufficient for my needs. The sun's hot and severe, so while I wait for

my water to purify- I strip down to my underclothes and wade into the mild current. I am filthy from head to toe, I try splashing myself LIKEWISE, eventually just lay down in the water for a few minutes, letting it wash off the soot, blood, and skin that has started to peel off my burns.

After rinsing out my clothes and hanging them on bushes to dry, I sit on the bank in the sun for a bit, untangling my hair with my fingers. My appetite returns, and I eat a cracker and a strip of beef. With a handful of

moss, I polish the blood from my silver weapons.

I easily take out a strange bird that must be some form of wild turkey. Anyway, it looks plenty edible to me. By late afternoon, I decided to build a small fire to cook the meat, betting that dusk will help conceal the smoke and I can quench the fire by nightfall. I have just placed the first lot over the coals when I hear the twig snap. I clean the tournament, taking superfluous care of the bird, LIKEWISE, nothing is alarming about it. Once the feathers are plucked, it is no bigger than a

chicken, LIKEWISE, it is plump and firm.

Revived, I treat my burns again, braid my hair and hang it in the font covering my nipples, and dress in damp clothes, knowing the sun will dry them soon enough. Following the stream against its current seems the smartest course of action.

The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. I am traveling uphill now, which I prefer, with a source of freshwater not only for myself similarly tournaments. My shoulders lower and I beam with my

white smile. She can move through the woods like a shadow, you must give her that. How else could she have followed me?

In one wave, I turn to the sound, bringing the bow and arrow to my shoulder. There is no one there. No one I can see anyway. Then I spot the tip of a child's boot just peeking out from behind the trunk of a tree.

'You know, they're not the only ones who can form alliances,' I say. For a moment, no reply. Then one of Leah's eyes edges around the trunk. 'You want me for a friend?' 'You can feed yourself.

Can they?' I ask. 'They don't need to. They have all those supplies,' Permitted says. 'Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?' I speak. 'I mean, it's the Famine Tournaments, right?' 'LIKEWISE, Melisa, they're not hungry,' says Leah. 'No, they're not. That is the problem,' I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that is not motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. 'I think we're going to have to fix that, Leah.'

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this

because as soon as the anthem finishes, she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no precautions. If she had wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker red ant's nesting. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can win these tournaments. Likewise, since the odds are still against- either of us alive, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I am distracted by my latest idea about Careers and their

supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I am sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle.

The years when they have not endangered it well, one year a pack of ugly reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament maker’s overflow washed it away, those are usually the ages- from other regions have won. How comforting the presence of another humanoid being can be.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is to their disadvantage, because they do not

know how to be hungry. Not the way Permitted, and I do. Likewise, I am too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, has given me a sense of security.

I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I have been in the arena. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it is the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of cannon thunderbolts makes me wide awake. The skies streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, LIKEWISE, there are not any.

‘Who do you think that was?’ I cannot help thinking of my boy. ‘I don’t know. It could have been any of the others,’ says Leah. ‘We’ll know tonight.’ ‘Who’s left again?’ I ask. ‘The boy from 1. From 9. Some from 2 I am not even sore does it matter- she said we are all

dead anyway. Thresh and me. And you and my boy,' says Leah. 'That's right. Wait, and the boy from ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.' There is someone else, I can recall...

Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is. 'I wonder how that last one died,' says Leah.

~*~

'Really? How?' You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she is exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal. 'No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt,' I say.

We do not get much hunting done though because I am too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of- Permitted about the Careers' base. She has only been in to spy on them briefly, LIKEWISE, she is observant. They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they have been leaving another- like, the boy from Borough 3, to watch over the supplies.

'The boy from region 12?' I ask. 'He's working with them?' 'Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got

stung, too, when they drew the ant in by the lake,' says Leah. 'Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, LIKEWISE, thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah. 'They agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard. Likewise, he's not very immense.'

'What weapons does he have?' I ask. 'And the food's just out in the open?' I speak. She nods at us. 'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I could not tell what exactly,' says Leah. 'Melisa,

even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it… Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sisters. 'Eat it!' She giggles.

'Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.'

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones,

who forage in the meadows in a Borough where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, ‘Music.’

I have a Gibson with a Bigsby on it… I said- ‘Music?’ I speak. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. ‘You have a lot of time for that?’

‘We sing at home. At work, too. That is why I love your pin,’ she says,

pointing to the blue jay that I've again forgotten about.

'Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,' she says.

'What do you mean?' I speak.

'I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time.

There's a special little song I do,' says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. 'And the blue jays

spread it around the groves. That is how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too nearby their nests. Likewise, you can't blame them for that.' I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That is how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of grass from her shirt. On it hangs a carved

wooden star. Or it is a flower. ‘It’s a good luck charm.’

‘Well, it’s worked so far,’ I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. ‘Maybe you should just stick with that.’

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she will have time for on her own. We decided to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before- I leave, I make sure Leah’s well stocked

with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag in case it is not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' she asks.

'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, permitted decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you will know I am okay,

only I can’t get back right away.’ ‘Haven’t you saw them? They’ve got nests ubiquitously,’ she says. I must admit I have not seen it. ‘Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I will see you for dinner,’ I say. ‘Are there many blue jays here?’ I ask. Without prior notice, permitted throws her arms around me. I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back. ‘You be careful,’ she says to me.

‘You, too,’ I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being

killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and permitted and a baker who has promised she will not go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once- I reach the stream, I have only to follow it downhill to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live? I struggle again to

remember that moment over Annha body when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. I must be cautious as I move along the water though because my thoughts are preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my boy.

Remember, I tell myself. You are the hunter now, not them. I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the police officers Permitted has told me about and again must admire her cleverness. It is right at the

edge of the wood, LIKEWISE, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began. When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reached the shallow stretch where I took my bath in

just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I do not see any others, LIKEWISE, I do notice some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my

stings. Clusters of bug nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

There are four-try LIKEWISE. The boy from Borough 1, Permitted and the girl from Borough 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from Borough 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Bureau. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with

a plastic box, he is easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. Likewise, he must be of some value, or they would not have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

All four seem to still be recuperating from the ant's attack. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known

about the leaves that healed them. Whatever medicines they found in Copiousness have been ineffective.

Some other factor is at play here, and I had better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the triangle is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

The possibilities are endless.

Most of the supplies, held in crates, burlap sacks, and plastic bins, are piled neatly in a triangle in what

seems a questionable distance from the camp. Others are sprinkled around the perimeter 50 miles away from this point I said- no way of getting there it is not worth it, almost impersonating the layout of supplies around the large amount at the onset of the tournament. All part of the tournament makes it stupid hard- to live… A canopy of netting that, aside from discouraging birds, seems to be useless shelters the goods itself.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from

Borough 3. One thing is for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. My arm's good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? One mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Borough 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others?

Thereby protecting the supplies LIKEWISE, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one of mine, I would draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway,

what am I thinking? There is that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I would need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the triangle, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. One contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I

would just be guessing. I am genuinely thinking of trying to recreate Fox-face's trip up to the triangle in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It is a big bag, LIKEWISE, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He is pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that

permitted must have set the first campfire. We had made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It is loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether the boy from Borough 3 should stay or accompany them.

‘He’s coming. We need him in the woods, and his job’s done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,’ says Leah.

‘What about Lover Boy?’ says the boy from Borough 1.

‘I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It is a miracle he has not bled to death yet. At any rate, he is in no shape to raid us,’ says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

‘Quickly,’ says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Borough 5, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing- I

hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, ‘When we find her, I kill her in my way, and no one interferes.’

Somehow- I do not think he is talking about Leah. She did not drop a nest of bugs on him. I stay put for half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance and gunfire.

There is no alternative to going for the goods. I am going to have to get in close and see if I cannot discover what exactly protects the supplies. I am

about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my left, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, it is Leah, LIKEWISE, then I recognize the boy and I blow his head off his shoulders-and the brains splatter all over the tree he was next, she is the one we could not remember this morning- creeping out onto the plain. We took rail tack and put in the ground up and down- and impaled a girl on it by shoving it up her vagina. Look she looks like a savior, permitted said. That not funny I said- your faith is not mine.

When she decides it is safe, she runs for the triangle, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that

have been littered around the triangle, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot. Then she begins to approach the triangle with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel, and lands poised on her tiptoes.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah’s second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

LIKEWISE, she overshot slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, LIKEWISE, nothing happens. In a moment, she regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I am right about the booby trap, LIKEWISE, it is more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to a tip-off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she is doing her odd little dance back out of

the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe.

I realize- I am grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I had already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such deftness? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands contacted the earth? You would have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You would have thought the very ground was going to explode.

'It's mined,' I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers'

willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Borough 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions, automobiles, and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies? That is not the sort of weapon the Tournament Producers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally.

I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down.

The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, LIKEWISE, the boy from Borough 3 must have managed to reactivate them. I have never seen anyone in the tournament do that to you. I bet it came as a shock even to the star makers.

Well, hurray for the boy from Borough 3 for putting one over on them, LIKEWISE, what am I supposed to do now? I cannot go strolling into that mess

without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow,

that is more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It does not have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

45

You saved me with those bugs. You are smart enough to still be alive. And I cannot seem to shake you anyway,' I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide.

'You hungry?' I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the

meat. ‘Come on then, I’ve had two kills today.’ tentatively steps out into the open. ‘I can fix your stings.’ ‘Can you?’ I ask. ‘How?’ He digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I am almost certain they are the ones my mother uses. ‘Where’d you find those?’ ‘Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,’ says my boy said. ‘There is a lot here, too.’

‘That’s right I said to her- my boy said she was easy to kill- that I was nuts- and he may have to get P-o-ed about that. You are Area 11.

Agriculture,' I say. 'Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings.' Permitted smiles. I have landed on one of the few things she will admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then. Fix me up.' I said she not going to hurt you… or me- see need us- more than we need here.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, LIKEWISE, it is not like we have a lot of

options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh.' The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It is as if the leaves are leaching the pain right out of the sting. She giggles. 'Okay,' she says, and holds out her hand. We shake- not to kill each other. 'It's a deal.' Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, LIKEWISE, neither of us mentions that.

'Oh,' says Permitted with a sigh. 'I've never had a whole leg to myself before.' I will bet she has not

had sex yet. I will bet meat hardly ever comes her way. ‘Take the other,’ I say. ‘Really?’ she asks- she over here yes, I have! You are seven years old- he looks weird- like yes right.

‘Bugs Oh, yes, we have them back home. I’ve been eating them for days,’ she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I tentatively bite into one, and it is as good as blackberries- that we had too.

‘How did you get those?’ she asks.

‘In my pack. They have been useless so far. They don’t block the sun

and they make it harder to see,' I say with a shrug.

'Where do you sleep?' I asked her. 'In the trees?' She nods. 'In just your jacket- or what?' That my blanket my jacket- and I sleep where I can find- and naked- if you must know… She holds up her extra pair of socks and said I use them as pads. Try it- it works…

We pick a fork high in a tree and settle in for the night just as the anthem begins to play. There were no deaths today. I think of how cold the nights have been. 'You can share my

sleeping bag if you want. We'll both easily fit.' Her face lights up. I can tell this is more than she dared hope for.

~*~

I do not answer the cam flying around me. If my boy did save me, I would be in debt again. And this cannot be paid back. 'If he did, it was all probably just part of his act. You know, to make people think he is in love with me. 'The sky goes dark, 'let us try out these night spectacles you have.' I pull out the glasses and slip them on. I can see everything from the leaves on the trees to a skunk strolling through the

bushes a good fifty feet away. I could kill it from here if I had a mind to. I could kill anyone. We shot one 300 years away. With her dad's custom gun. One was stolen from me she said. 'I wonder who else got a pair of these, a thong is what she held up.' I speak. I can run in these can you- I do not wear those for the point. How about a bra? Not yet- me either… my boy sniggers… saying girl chat.

Make love to me!

…And he did!

Step 1- Put her in 'The Mood-'

What is said only online- and what I do for her- they have all this for us to know: Before you have sex, you must put you are a woman in the mood? This involves setting up the right kind of environment which will enhance her pleasure. To put her in the mood, you should darken the room, light some candles, and put on good music. Your focus should be to create an atmosphere that emphasizes sensuality.

Step 2- Use foreplay- Foreplay is one of the most important things to learn about how to make love to a woman. Using foreplay is the best way

to transition from a conversation about having sex. Typically, foreplay involves kissing, ‘heavy petting,’ and sensual massages. The rule of thumb is to focus on her pleasure and start building up intensity.

Step 3- Give her oral sex-

Towards the end of foreplay, you need to start giving her oral sex. Start slowly and use your tongue and fingers. Since women like different things in oral sex, try to experiment with various oral sex techniques. When you see her get excited, continue to do whatever is getting her into it.

Step 4- Tease her- Once you have brought her to the pinnacle of pleasure from oral sex, you should start to have sex. Now, most guys will just start having sex without any thought. This is a mistake! Instead of going right for sex, you should start to tease her. What you should do is go slowly and start to have sex, then stop. Keep doing this till she goes crazy and practically pulls you inside her.

Step 5- Start slowly and build up intensity now once you have had sex, it is important to change paces (and positions.) Again, your focus is to

concentrate on her pleasure and make sure she is enjoying herself.

What works is to build up speed then pull back to a slow and sensual pace. Keep doing this pattern until both of you cannot take it anymore. Knowing how to make love to a woman is an important skill to have.

If you can follow the five-step process I described in this article, you will instantly become the best lover she has ever had. Now all you must do is to find a woman to practice your new skills! The teen guidelines for sex in the Star tournament, for love- and real

compels- if it is hock-up or tack by fours sex just Freak! There no laws stopping them from taking you, your ass is own by them of the tournament and the odds.

46

Sam! He could send me water! Yet that makes you weak- and you go down in your likeness and points. Press and news, have it delivered to me in a silvery descend in minutes- I know this. I know I must have sponsors, at least one or two who could afford a pint of liquid for me. Yes, it is pricey, LIKEWISE, these people, they are made

of money. Besides, they will be betting on me as well. Sam- does not realize how deep my need is. You can get all this if you have the courage.

I say in a voice as loud as I dare. ‘Water.’ I wait, hopefully, for a parachute to descend from the sky. Likewise, nothing is forthcoming.

Something is wrong. Am I deluded about having sponsors? Or has my boy’s conduct made them all hang back? No, I do not believe it. There is someone out there who wants to buy me water only; Sam- is declining to let it go through. As my counselor, he gets

to regulate the flow of gifts from the guarantors. I know he hates me. He has made that clear enough, I have misjudged Sam- he has no intention of helping me at all.

Almost nothing stayed in my stomach yesterday, and I am already starting to feel the effects of Starvation.

Below me, I can see the Career pack and my boy asleep on the ground. By her position, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, I would guess Glimmer was supposed to be on guard, LIKEWISE, fatigue overcame her.

My eyes squint as they try to penetrate the tree next to me, LIKEWISE, I cannot make out Leah. Since she tipped me off, it only seems fair to warn her. Besides,

If I am going to die today, it is Permitted I want to win. Even if it means a little extra food for my family, the idea of my boy being crowned victor is unbearable.

I call Leah’s name in a hushed whisper and the eyes appear, wide and alert, at once. She points up to the nest again. I hold up my knife and make a

sawing motion. She nods and disappears.

There is a rustling in a nearby tree. Then the same noise again a bit farther off. I realize she is leaping from tree to tree. It is all I can do not to laugh aloud. Is this what she showed the Tournament Producers? I imagine her flying around the training equipment never touching the floor. She should have gotten at least a seven.

Rosy streaks are breaking through in the east. I cannot afford to wait any longer. Compared to the

agony of last night's climb, this one is a cinch. At the tree limb that holds the nest, I position the knife in the groove, and I am about to draw the teeth across the wood when I see something moving. There, on the nest. The bright gold gleam of a maestro's idly making its way across the papery leaden exterior.

No inquiry, it is acting a little subdued, LIKEWISE, the wasp is up and moving and that means the others will be out soon as well. Sweat breaks out on the palms of my hands, beading up through the ointment, and I do my

best to pat them dry on my shirt- yes, I topless no you like that I asked to the camera that was flying like a little blue jay- by me un-maned- getting all the goods. If I do not get through this branch in a matter of seconds, the entire swarm could emerge and attack me.

There is no sense in putting it off. I take a deep breath, grip the knife handle, and bear down as hard as I can. Back, forth, back, forth! The red ants begin to bite, and I hear them coming out of the holes. Back, forth, back, forth they make their way with me!

A stabbing pain shoots through my knee and I know one has found me and the others will be honing in. Back, forth, back, forth. And just as the knife cuts through, I shove the end of the branch as far away from me as I can. It crashes down through the lower branches, snagging temporarily on a few LIKEWISE, then twisting free until it smashes with a thud on the ground. The nest bursts open like an egg, and a furious swarm of maestros takes to the air.

I feel a second sting on the cheek, a third on my neck, and their

venom almost immediately makes me woozy. I cling to the tree with one arm while I rip the barbed stingers out of my flesh. Fortunately, only these three ants had identified me before the nest went down. Red can kill if you get over 100 bits- black- can make you blow chunks, and yellow and black- dizzy and pass out- The rest of the insects have targeted their enemies on the ground and in the air. Your only friend here are the bluebirds that sing, and some of the others, there is only one that can kill, and the all-black one- it picks, and stocks known as the Amzal bird you as you pass it.

This is all right, I think. This is not so bad here. The air is less hot, signifying evening's approach. There is a slight, sweet scent that reminds me of lilies. My fingers stroke the smooth ground, sliding easily across the top. This is an okay place to die, I think.

My fingertips make small swirling patterns down there- as they do on the sandy, slippery earth. I love mud like I like liking my fingers after the height of my moment on the screen- I think it feels so good.

How many times 10 or more in one day- just the same- I have tracked

tournament with the help of its soft, readable surface. Good for bee wounds- I hate red ants also up my butt cheeks- good there bigger and redder them my nipples, too. Muddy. Sludge. Muck! My eyes fly open, and I dig my fingers into the earth. It is mud! My nose lifts in the air. And those are lilies! Pond lilies! It is all I can do not to plunge my face into the water and gulp down as much as I can hold. Likewise, I have just enough sense left to abstain. With trembling hands, I get out my flask and fill it with water.

I crawl now, through the mud, dragging myself toward the scent. Five yards from where I fell, I crawled through a tangle of plants into a pond. I take one swallow and make myself wait. Then another. Over the next couple of hours, I drink the entire half-gallon or so. Then a second. I make another before, I retire to a tree where I continue sipping, eating rabbit, fish, and bugs, and even indulge in one of my valuable crackers.

Floating on the top, creamy flowers in bloom, are my beautiful lilies, like in an impressionistic painting

I add what I remember to be the right number of drops of iodine for purifying it. Slowly, easy now, I tell myself. Sucking the blood out- hard.

By the time the anthem plays, I feel remarkably better. The half an hour of waiting is agony, LIKEWISE, I do it. At least, it is half an hour, equally it is certainly if I can view.

There are no faces tonight, no callouts today, or any died. Tomorrow I will stay here, resting, camouflaging my backpack with mud, catching some of those little fish I saw as I sipped, and digging up the roots of the pond lilies

to make a nice meal. I snuggle down in my sleeping bag, hanging on to my water bottle for dear life, which, of course, it is.

This was no campfires gone out of control, no accidental occurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, star-maker- made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, no fights at all.

The audience in the Bureau will be getting bored, claiming that these Tournaments are verging on

tediousness. This is the one thing the Tournament must not do.

It is not hard to follow the Tournament maker’s enthusiasm. There is the career pack, and then there are the rest of us, spread far, and thin crossways there in the arena.

This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I have seen, the same it is very, right and so-o actual.

I obstacle over a burning log. Not high enough… The tail end of my jacket catches on fire, and I must stop

to rip it away from my body and stamp out the flames as they start to lick my body- and I now topless. Running half-naked in the woods with him running not too far away- downing the same- LIKEWISE, I dare leave the jacket even if it has all my metals, I cannot I have to get them off- fast it is all I must show what I did- I have 50 kills on their… now- more than any other girl here- burnt and ablaze some, I dump with little whiter I have on it- I knew that jackman's more than my life with having H20.

My hair- looks cool this way I said- thinking about it. I take the risk of shoving it in my sleeping bag saggy, hoping the lack of air will suppress, what I have not smothered. This is all I have, what I carry on my back, and it is a little an adequate amount to survive with… I no… I do not seem to have much choice. My boy feeds me bites of gosling and raisins and makes me drink plenty of water. He rubs some warmth back into my feet and wraps them in his jacket before tucking the sleeping bag back up around my chin.

‘Your boots and socks are still damp and the weather’s not helping much,’ he says. There is a clap of thunder, and I see lightning electrify the sky through an opening in the rocks. Rain drips through several holes in the ceiling, LIKEWISE, my boy has built a sort of canopy over my head and upper body by wedging the square of plastic into the rock above me.

‘I wonder what brought on this storm. I mean, who’s the target?’ says My boy.

‘Permitted and Thresh,’ I say without thinking. ‘Fox-face will be in

her den somewhere, and Clove. she cut me and then.

‘My voice trails off.’

‘I know Clove’s dead. I saw it in the sky last night,’ he says. ‘Did you kill her?’

‘No. Thresh broke her skull with a rock,’ I say.

‘Lucky he didn’t catch you, too,’ says My boy.

The memory of the feast returns full force and I feel sick. ‘He did. LIKEWISE, he let me go.’ Then, of course, I must tell him. About things, I

have kept to myself because he was too sick to ask, and I was not ready to relive anyway. Like the explosion and my ear and Leah's dying and the boy from Borough 1 and the bread. All of which leads to what happened with Thresh and how he was paying off a debt of sorts.

'He let you go because he didn't want to owe you anything?' asks My boy in disbelief.

'Yes. I do not expect you to understand it. You have always had enough. Likewise, if you had lived in

the Seam, I would not have to explain,' I say.

'And don't try it. I'm too dim to get it.'

'It's like bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that,' I say.

'The bread? What? From when we were kids?' he says. 'I think we can let that go. I mean, you just brought me back from the dead.'

'LIKEWISE, you didn't know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it is the first gift that is always

the hardest to pay back. I wouldn't even have been here to do it if you hadn't helped me then,' I say. 'Why did you, anyway?'

'Why? You know why,' My boy says. I give my head a slight, painful shake. 'Sam- said you would take a lot of convincing.'

'Sam-?' I ask. 'What's he got to do with it?'

'Nothing,' My boy says. 'So, Permitted and Thresh, huh? I guess it's too much to hope that they'll simultaneously destroy each other?'

Likewise, the thought only upsets me. ‘I think we would like Thresh. I think he’d be our friend back in Borough Twelve,’ I say.

‘Then let us hope Permitted kills him, so we don’t have to,’ says My boy grimly.

I do not want Permitted to kill Thresh at all. I do not want anyone else to die. LIKEWISE, this is not the kind of thing that victors go around saying in the arena. Despite my best efforts, I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes.

My boy looks at me with concern.

‘What is it? Are you in a lot of pain?’

I give him another answer because it is equally Permitted LIKEWISE, can be taken as a moment of weakness instead of a terminal one. ‘I want to go home, my boy,’ I said plaintively, like a small child.

‘You will. I promise,’ he says, and bends over to kiss me.

‘I want to go home now,’ I say.

‘Tell you what. You go back to sleep and dream of home. And you will be there for real before you know it,’ lie says. ‘Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I whisper. ‘Wake me if you need me to keep watch.’

‘I’m good and rested, thanks to you and Sam-. Besides, who knows how long this will last?’ He speaks.

What does he mean? The storm? The brief respite I-I brings us. The Tournament themselves? I do not know, LIKEWISE, I am ion sad and tried to ask.

It is the evening when my boy wakes me again. The rain has turned into a downpour, sending streams of water through our ceiling where earlier there had been only dripping. My boy placed the broth pot under the worst one and repositioned the plastic to deflect most of it from me. I feel a bit better, able to sit up without getting too dizzy, and I am famished. So, it is my boy. He has been waiting for me to wake up to eat and is eager to get started.

There is not much left. Two pieces of a gosling, a small mishmash of roots, and a handful of dried fruit.

‘Should we try and ration it?’ My boy asks.

‘No, let us just finish it. The gosling’s getting old anyway, and the last thing we need is to get sick of spoiled food,’ I say, dividing the food into two equal piles. We try and eat slowly, LIKEWISE, we are both so hungry we are done in a couple of minutes.

My stomach is in no way satisfied. ‘Tomorrow’s a hunting day,’ I say. ‘I’ll kill, and you cook,’ I say.

‘And you can always gather.’ ‘I won’t be much help with that,’ My boy says. ‘I’ve never hunted before.’ ‘I wish there were some sort of bread bush out there,’ says my boy.

‘The bread they sent me from Region 11 was still warm,’ I say with a sigh. ‘Here, chew these.’ I hand him a couple of mint leaves and pop a few in my mouth.

It is hard to even see the projection in the sky, LIKEWISE, it is

clear enough to know there were no more deaths today. So, Permitted and Thresh have not had it out yet.

I brace myself for the agony that is sure to follow. LIKEWISE, as the tip opens the first cut at my lip, some great form yanks Clove from my body, and then she is screaming. I am too stunned at first, too unable to process what has happened. Has my boy somehow come to my rescue? Have the Tournament Producers sent in some wild animals to add to the fun? Has a hovercraft inexplicably plucked her into the air?

Likewise, when I push myself up on my numb arms, I see it is none of the above. Clove is dangling a foot off the ground, imprisoned in Thresh's arms. I let out a gasp, seeing him like that, towering over me, holding Clove like a rag doll. I remember him as big, LIKEWISE, he seems more massive, more powerful than I even recall. If anything, he seems to have gained weight in the arena. He flips Clove around and flings her onto the ground.

When he shouts, I jump, never having heard him speak above a

mutter. ‘What’d you do to that little girl? You kill her?’

Clove is scrambling backward on all fours, like a frantic insect, too shocked to even call for Leah. ‘No! No, it wasn’t me!’

Dinah- ‘you said her name. I heard from you. You kill her?’ And I did- Another thought brings a fresh wave of rage to his features. ‘You cut her up like you were going to cut up this girl here?’

Dinah brings the rock down hard against Clove’s temple. It is not bleeding, LIKEWISE, I can see the dent

in her skull, and I know that she is a goner. There's still life in her now though, in the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the low moan escaping her lips.

When Thresh whirls around on me, the rock rises, I know it is no good to run. And my bow is empty, the last loaded arrow having gone in Clove's direction. I am trapped in the glare of his strange golden-brown eyes. 'What'd she means? About Permitted being your ally?'

'And you killed her?' He demands me to say if I think he could. I try to run…

‘Yes- I killed him. And buried her in flowers,’ I say.

‘And I sang her to sleep.’

Tears spring in my eyes. The tension, the fight goes out of me at the memory. And I am overwhelmed by Leah and the pain in my head, and my fear of Thresh, and the moaning of the dying girl a few feet away.

‘To sleep?’ Thresh says gruffly.

‘To death. I sang until she died,’ I say. ‘Your Borough. they sent me bread.’ My hand reaches up LIKEWISE, not for an arrow that I

know I will never reach. Just to wipe my nose.

Conflicting emotions cross Thresh's face. He lowers the rock and points at me, accusingly. 'Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we are even then. No more owed. You understand?'

I nod because I do understand. About owing. About hating it. I understand that if Thresh wins, he will have to go back and face a Borough that has already broken all the rules to thank me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me, too. And I understand

that, for the moment, thresh is not going to smash my skull.

‘Clove!’ his voice is much nearer now. I can tell by the pain in it that he sees her on the ground.

‘You better run now, Girl,’ says the boy that has gotten as many as me.

I do not need to be told twice. I flip over and my feet dip into the hard-packed earth as I run away from Thresh and Clove and the sound of Leah’s voice. Only when I reach the woods do I turn back for an instant. Thresh and both large backpacks are vanishing over the edge of the plain into an area I

have never seen. Permitted kneels beside Clove, spear in hand, begging her to stay with him. In a moment, he will realize it is futile, she cannot be saved. I crash into the trees, repeatedly wiping away the blood that is pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am. After a few minutes, I heard the cannon, and I knew that

Clove has died, that Permitted will be on one of our trails. Either Thrash is or mine. I am seized with terror, weak from my head wound, shaking. I load an arrow, LIKEWISE,

permitted can throw that spear as far as I can shoot.

Only one thing calms me down. Thresh has Leah’s backpack containing the thing he needs desperately. If I had to bet, permitted headed out after Thresh, not me. Still, I do not slow down when I reach the water. I plunge right in, boots still on, and flounder downstream. I pull off Leah’s socks that I have been using for gloves and press them into my forehead, trying to staunch the flow of blood, LIKEWISE, they are soaked in minutes.

‘Where did Thresh go? I mean, what’s on the far side of the circle?’ I asked my boy.

‘A field. As far as you can see it is full of grass as high as my shoulders. I do not know, some of them are grain.

There are patches of assorted colors.

Likewise, there are no paths,’ says my boy.

‘I bet some of them are grain. I bet Thresh knows which ones, too,’ I say. ‘Did you go in there?’

‘No. Nobody wanted to track Thresh down in that grass. It has a sinister feeling to it. Every time I look at that field, all I can think of are hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand,’ My boy says. ‘There could be anything in there.’

I do sleep, on the train back- LIKEWISE, in the morning I am extra-cautious, thinking that while the Careers might hesitate to attack me in a tree, they are completely capable of setting an ambush for me. I make sure to fully prepare myself for the day by eating a big breakfast, securing my

pack, readying my weapons before I descend. LIKEWISE, all seems peaceful and undisturbed on the ground. I tossed most of it- he in my mind now only. I do not even have a photo of him… they would not let me keep one- for he was a week.

47

‘My boy, you were supposed to wake me after a couple of hours,’ I say.

‘For what? Nothing’s going on here,’ he says.

‘Besides, I like watching you sleep. You do not scowl. Improves your looks a lot.’

This, of course, brings on a scowl that makes him grin. That is when I notice how dry his lips are. I tested his cheek. Hot as a coal stove. He claims he has been drinking, LIKEWISE, the containers still feel full to me. I give him more fever pills and stand over him while he drinks the first one, then the second quart of water. Then I tend to his minor wounds, the burns, the stings, which are showing

improvement. I steel myself and unwrap my leg.

‘Burn medicine,’ I say sheepishly. ‘Oh, and some bread.’

‘I always knew you were his favorite,’ says my boy.

‘Please, he can’t stand being in the same room with me,’ I say.

‘Because you’re just a-like,’ mutters My boy. I ignore it though because this is not the time for me to be insulting Sam-, which is my first impulse.

I let My boy doze off while his clothes dry out, LIKEWISE, by late afternoon, I do not dare wait any longer. I gently shake his shoulder. ‘My boy, we’ve got to go now.’ ‘Go?’ He seems confused. ‘Go where?’ ‘Away from here. Downstream maybe. Somewhere we can hide you until you are stronger,’ I say. I help him dress, leaving his feet bare so we can walk in the water, and pull him upright. His face drains of color the moment he puts weight on his leg. ‘Come on. You can do this.’

Likewise, he cannot. Not for long anyway. We make it about fifty yards downstream, with him propped up by my shoulder and I can tell he is going to blackout. I sit him on the bank, push his head between his knees, and pat his back awkwardly as I survey the area. Of course, I would love to get him up in a tree, LIKEWISE, that is not going to happen. It could be worse though. Some of the rocks form small cave-like structures. I set my sights on one about twenty yards above the stream. When my boy's ability to stand, I half-guide, half-carry him up to the cave. I would like to look around for a

better place, LIKEWISE, this one will have to do because my ally is shot. Paperwhite, panting, and even though it is only just cooling off, he is shivering.

I cover the floor of the cave with a layer of pine needles, unroll my sleeping bag, and tuck him into it. I get a couple of pills and some water into him when he is not noticing, LIKEWISE, he refuses to eat even the fruit. Then he just lies there, his eyes trained on my face as I build a blind out of vines to conceal the mouth of the cave. The result is unsatisfactory. An

animal might not question it, LIKEWISE, a human would see hands had manufactured it quickly enough. I tear it down in frustration.

'Melisa,' he says. I go over to him and brush my hair back from his eyes. 'Thanks for finding me.'

'You would have found me if you could,' I say. His forehead's burning up. Like medicines do not affect me at all. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I am scared he is going to die.

'Yes. Look, if I don't make it back, 'he begins.

‘Don’t talk like that. I didn’t drain all that puss for anything,’ I say.

‘I know. LIKEWISE, just in case I don’t- ‘he tries to continue.

‘No, my boy, I don’t even want to discuss it,’ I say, placing my fingers on his lips to quiet him.

‘LIKEWISE, I- ‘he insists. Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words. This is overdue anyway since he is right, we are supposed to be madly in love. It is the first time I have ever kissed a boy, which should make some sort of impression I guess, LIKEWISE, all I can

register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever. I break away and pull the edge of the sleeping bag up around him. ‘You’re not going to die. I forbid it. All right?’

‘All right,’ he whispers.

I step out in the cool evening air just as the parachute floats down from the sky. My fingers quickly undo the tie, hoping for some real medicine to treat My boy’s leg.

Instead- I found a pot of hot broth.

Sam- could not be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. ‘You’re supposed to be in love, sweetheart.

The boy’s death. Give me something I can work with!’

~*~

And- he is right. If I want to keep My boy alive, I must give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers are desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance.

Never having been in love, this is going to be a real trick. I think of my parents. The way my father never failed to bring her gifts from the woods. The way my mother's face would light up to the sound of his boots at the door. The way she almost stopped living when he died.

'My boy!' I say, trying for the special tone that my mother used only with my father. He is dozed off again, LIKEWISE, I kiss him awake, which startles him. Then he smiles as if he would be happy to lie there gazing at me forever. He is great at this stuff.

~*~

I hold up the pot. ‘My boy, look what Sam- has sent you.’

My heart drops into my stomach. It is worse, much worse. There is no more pus in evidence, LIKEWISE, the swelling has increased, and the tight shiny skin is inflamed. Then I see the red streaks starting to crawl up his leg. Blood poisoning. Unchecked, it will kill him for sure. My chewed-up leaves and ointment will not make a dent in it. We will need strong anti-infection drugs from the Bureau. I cannot imagine the cost of such potent

medicine. If Sam- pooled every donation from every sponsor, would he have enough? I doubt it. Gifts go up in price the longer the Tournament continues. What buys a full meal on day one buys a cracker on day twelve. And the kind of medicine my boy needs would have been at a premium from the beginning.

'Well, there's more swelling, LIKEWISE, the pus is gone,' I say in an unsteady voice.

'I know what blood poisoning is, Melisa,' says my boy. 'Even if my mother isn't a healer.' 'You're just

going to have to outlast the others, my boy. They'll cure it back at the Bureau when we win,' I say. 'Yes, that's a good plan,' he says. Likewise, this is mostly for my benefit. 'You have to eat. Keep your strength up. I'm going to make your soup,' I say. 'Don't light a fire,' he says. 'It's not worth it.'

~*~

'We'll see,' I say. As I take the pot down to the stream, I am struck by how brutally hot it is. I swear the Tournament Producers are progressively ratcheting up the temperature in the daytime and

sending it plummeting at night. The heat of the sunbaked stones by the stream gives me an idea though. I will not need to light a fire.

I settle down on a big flat rock halfway between the stream and the cave. After purifying half a pot of water, I place it in direct sunlight and add several egg-size hot stones to the water. I am the first to admit I am not much of a cook. LIKEWISE, since soup involves tossing everything in a pot and waiting, it is one of my best dishes. I mince gosling until it is mush- and mash some of Leah’s roots.

Fortunately, they've both been roasted already so they mostly need to be heated up. Already, between the sunlight and the rocks, the water's warm. I put in the meat and roots, swap in fresh rocks, and find something green to spice it up a little. Before long, I discovered a tuft of chives growing at the base of some rocks. Perfect.

I chop them very finely and add them to the pot, switch out the rocks again, put them on the lid, and let the whole thing stew. 'Did I ever tell you about how I got my sister's goat?' I ask. My boy shakes his head and looks at

me expectantly. So, I begin. Likewise, carefully. Because my words are going out all over them.

-And-

While people have no doubt put two and two together that- I hunt illegally, I do not want to hurt Permitted or Sue or the others or even the Peacekeepers back home who are my customers by officially announcing they would break the law, too.

Here is the real story of how I got the money for my sister's goat, Lady. It was a Friday evening, the day before My sister's tenth birthday in late

May. As soon as school ended, Permitted and I hit the woods because I wanted to get enough to trade for a present for my sister. Some new cloth for a dress or a hairbrush. Our snares had done well enough, and the woods were flush with greens, LIKEWISE, this was no more than our average Friday-night haul. I was disappointed as we headed back, even though permitted said we would be sure to do better tomorrow. We were resting a moment by a stream when we saw him. A young buck, a yearling by his size. His antlers were just growing in, still small and coated in velvet. Poised to run

LIKEWISE, unsure of us, unfamiliar with humans… beautiful.

Less beautiful perhaps when the two arrows caught him, one in the neck, the other in the chest. Permitted and I had shot at the same time. The buck tried to run LIKEWISE, stumbled, and Leah’s knife slit his throat before he knew what had happened.

Momentarily, I had felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat.

A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost did not count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and trying to hack off pieces themselves. Suzann had intervened and sent us with our deer LIKEWISE, not before it had been irreparably damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

I have seen very few signs of tournament around, LIKEWISE, I do not feel comfortable leaving My boy alone while I hunt, so I rig half a dozen snares and hope I get lucky. I wonder about the others and how they are managing now that their main source of food has been blown up. At least three of them, Leah, Clove, and Neahie, had been relying on it. Probably not Thresh though. I have a feeling he must share some of Leah's knowledge on how to feed yourself from the earth. Are they fighting each other? Looking for us? One of them has located us and is just

waiting for the right moment to attack. The idea sends me back to the cave.

My boys stretched out on top of the sleeping bag in the shade of the rocks. Although he brightens a bit when I come in, it is clear he feels miserable. I put cool cloths on his head, LIKEWISE, they warm up as soon as they touch his skin.

‘Do you want anything?’ I ask.

‘No,’ he says. ‘Thank you. Wait, yes. Tell me a story.’

‘A story? What about?’ I speak. I am not much for storytelling. It is like

singing. Likewise, occasionally, my sister wheedles one out of me.

‘Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember,’ says my boy.

Something between a sigh and a huff of exasperation leaves my mouth. A happy story? This will require a lot more effort than the soup. I rack my brains for good memories. Most of them involve Permitted and me out hunting and somehow, I do not think these will play well with either my boy or the audience. That leaves my sister.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the others. Even though we were known hunters, it would not have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Borough 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky girl named Rooba said all she did was eat a rich sitter, who came to the back door when we knocked. You do not haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, LIKEWISE, it is a

fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the others. Even with the money divided into two, neither permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I got the money for the goat, LIKEWISE, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That cannot hurt anyone. Then I pick up the story in the late afternoon of My sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There is an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I do not know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he has a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines.

Likewise, he is lucky. Somewhere along the way- he saved up

enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He is filthy and impatient, LIKEWISE, the goats are clean, and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. LIKEWISE, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

‘Leah,’ I whispered. ‘I want that goat for My sister.’

Owning a babysitter goat can change your life in Borough 12. The animals can live off anything, the Meadow’s a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It is not even against the law.

‘She’s hurt pretty bad,’ said Leah.

‘We better take a closer look.’

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

‘Let her be,’ said the man.

‘Just looking,’ said Leah.

The man shrugged. ‘Hang around and see.’ I turned and saw Roomba coming across the square toward us. ‘Lucky thing you showed up,’ said the Goat Man when she arrived. ‘Girls got her eye on your goat.’

‘Not if she’s spoken for,’ I said carelessly.

Roomba looked me up and down then frowned at the goat. ‘She’s not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.’

‘What?’ said the Goat Man. ‘We had a deal.’

‘We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she’s stupid enough to take her,’ said Roomba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, LIKEWISE, he still wanted that goal off his hands. It took us half an hour to

agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I had been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, LIKEWISE, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. He wanted to see the look on my sister's face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck. Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen my sister's reaction when we walked in

with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once.

My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, LIKEWISE, the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says My boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

‘Oh, no, my boy. They work magic. That thing couldn’t have died if it tried,’ I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my useless hands.

‘Don’t worry. I’m not trying,’ he jokes. ‘Finish the story.’

‘Well, that’s it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with Lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or

something,’ I say. ‘It was already mad about her.’

‘Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?’ he asks.

‘I think so,’ I say. ‘Why?’

‘I’m just trying to get a picture,’ he says thoughtfully. ‘I can see why that day made you happy.’

‘Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,’ 1 say.

‘Yes, of course- I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,’ says My boy drily.

‘The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,’ I say in a superior tone.

‘Well, it wouldn’t dare do anything else after you saved its life,’ says my boy. ‘I intend to do the same thing.’

‘Really? What did you cost me again?’ I ask.

‘A lot of trouble. Do not worry. You’ll get it all back,’ he says.

‘You’re not making sense,’ I say. I tested his forehead. The lever’s

going nowhere LIKEWISE, up. ‘You’re a little cooler though.’

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I am on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It is my new best friend, Claudius Temple-Smith, and as I expected, he is inviting us to a feast. Well, we’re not that hungry and I wave his offer away in indifference when he says, ‘Now hold on.

Some of you may already be declining my invitation. LIKEWISE, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.’

I do need something desperately. Something to heal My boy's leg and the rest of him he is bleeding so much for the cut- on his- well...

'Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your Borough number, at the Copiousness at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,' says Claudius.

There is nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind.

‘No,’ he says. ‘You’re not risking your life for me.’

‘Who said I was?’ I speak.

‘So, you’re not going?’ he asks.

‘Of course, I’m not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I am running straight into some fight against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Don’t be stupid,’ I say, helping him back to bed. ‘I’ll let them fight it out, we’ll see who’s in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.’

‘You’re such a bad liar, Melisa- I don’t know how you’ve survived this

long.’ He begins to mimic me. ‘I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You are a little cooler though. Of course, I am not going. He shakes his head. ‘Never gamble at cards.

You’ll lose your last coin,’ he says.

Anger flashed my face. ‘All right, I am going, and you can’t stop me!’

‘I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to Copiousness, LIKEWISE, if I am yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I will be dead for sure,’ he

says. ‘I won’t die. I promise. If you promise not to go,’ he says. We are at something of a stalemate. I know I cannot argue with him out of this one, so I do not try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. ‘Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!’ I snap at him.

‘You won’t get a hundred yards from here on that leg,’ I say.

‘Then I’ll drag myself,’ says My boy. ‘You go and I’m going, too.’

He is just stubborn enough and just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if a does not find him, something else might. He cannot defend himself. I would have to call him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

‘What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?’ I speak. He must know that is not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I did not even try.

‘Agreed. Is it ready?’ He asks.

‘Wait here,’ I say. The air’s gone cold even though the sun’s still up. I am right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And it does not taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you do not know what fever does to people. He is like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has

soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he is going to die if I do not get to that feast. I will keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he will be gone. And I will be here all alone.

Again. Waiting for the others.

I am so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after

it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He has gotten the medicine- I do not know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It is such a tiny vial though. It must be extraordinarily strong to cure someone as ill as My boy. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall to the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There is no question, it is sleep syrup. It is a common medicine in Borough 12. Cheap, as medicine goes,

LIKEWISE, very addictive. Everyone has had a dose at one time or another.

We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, LIKEWISE, what good is that? I am so furious I am about to throw Sam's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day…? That is more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries, so the taste will not be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. ‘I’ve brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.’

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly.

‘They’re overly sweet.’

‘Yes, they’re sugar berries. My gram makes jam from them. Haven’t you ever had them before?’ I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

‘No,’ he says, almost puzzled. ‘LIKEWISE, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?’

‘Well, you can’t get them in the market much, they only grow wild,’ I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

‘They’re sweet as syrup,’ he says, taking the last spoonful. ‘Syrup.’ His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, LIKEWISE, it is too late, he is already losing consciousness.

Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I have done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. ‘Who cannot lie, My boy?’ I say, even though he cannot hear me.

~*~

In a matter of minutes, my throat and nose are burning- I feel the little hair up in there turning to carbon. That is what happens to you when you pass- you turn to black goo- carbon.

Traumatized yet- me too, it what they want- NO?

The coughing begins soon after, besides my lungs begin to feel as if they are being cooked. I have just decided to try and loop back around, although it will require miles of travel away from the inferno and then a very circuitous route back when the first fireball blasts into the rock about two feet from my head. I spring out from under my ledge, energized by renewed fear.

Uneasiness turns to distress until each breath sends a searing pain

through my boobs- or lack of them. I do not want to burn them off before I get them- I manage to take cover under a stone outcropping just as the vomiting begins, and I lose my meager supper, in addition to all that jazz- water has remained in my stomach. Squatting on my hands, and knees, I retch until there is nothing left to come up.

You get one minute, I tell myself. One minute to rest. I take the time to reorder my supplies, wash up the sleeping bag, and messily stuff everything into the backpack. My minute's up. I know I need to keep

moving, but at the same token I am trembling and lightheaded now, gasping for air. I allow myself about a spoonful of water to rinse my mouth and spit then take a few swallows from my bottle.

I know it is time to move on, LIKEWISE, the smoke has clouded my thoughts. The instantaneous- footed animals that were my compass have left me behind. I know I have not been in this part of the woods before, there were no sizeable rocks like the one I am sheltering against on my earlier

travels. Where is the Tournament-makers driving me?

Back to the lake- I know that sucks?

To a whole new terrain filled with new

dangers? I had just found a few hours of peace at the pond when this attack began. Would there be any way I could travel like the fire, besides working my way back there, to the birthplace of water at least? The wall of fire must have an end and it will not burn indefinitely. Not because the Tournament- makers could not keep it

powered correspondingly because, again, that would invite allegations of tedium from the audience. If I could get back behind the fire line, I could avoid meeting up with the Careers.

48

The tournament has taken a twist. The fire was just to get us moving, now the audience will get to see some real fun. When I hear the next hiss, I flatten on the ground, not taking time to look. The fireball hits a tree off to my left, engulfing it in flames. To remain still is death. I am barely on my feet before the third ball hits the

ground where I was lying, sending a pillar of fire up behind me. Time loses meaning now as I frantically try to dodge the attacks. I cannot see where they are being launched from, LIKEWISE, it is not a hovercraft.

The angles are not extreme enough. This whole segment of the woods has been armed with precision launchers- that is concealed in trees or rocks. Somewhere, in a cool and spotless room, a Tournament maker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a

second. All that is needed is a direct hit.

Whatever vague plan I had conceived regarding returning to my pond is wiped from my mind as I zigzag and dive and leap to avoid the fireballs.

Something keeps me moving forward, though. A lifetime of watching the Famine Tournaments lets me know that certain areas of the arena are rigged for certain attacks. Each one is only the size of an apple, LIKEWISE, packs tremendous power on contact. Ever since I have gone into overdrive as the need to survive takes over. There is

no time to judge if a move is the correct one. When there is a hiss, I act or die. And that if I can just get away from this section, I might be able to move out of reach of the launchers. I might also then fall straight into a pit of vipers, LIKEWISE, I cannot worry about that now.

This time it is an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose as well. I am forced to stop as my body convulses, trying desperately to rid itself of the poisons I have been for how long I scramble along dodging the

fireballs I cannot say, LIKEWISE, the attacks finally begin to abate.

Which is good because I am retching again. Sucking in during the attack. I wait for the next hiss, the next signal to bolt. It does not come. The force of the retching has squeezed tears out of my stinging eyes. My clothes are drenched in sweat.

My muscles react, only not fast enough this time.

The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, likewise, not before it skids across my right calf.

Seeing my pants leg on fire sends me over the edge. Somehow, through the smoke and vomit, I pick up the scent of singed hair. My hand fumbles to my braid and finds a fireball has seared off at least six inches of it.

Strands of blackened hair crumble in my fingers. I stare at them, fascinated by the transformation when the hissing registers. I twist and scuttle backward on my hands and feet, shrieking, trying to remove myself from the horror. When I finally regain enough sense, I roll my leg back and forth on the ground, which stifles the

worst of it. Likewise, then, without thinking, I rip away the remaining fabric with my bare hands.

My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts. I am shaking too hard to move. If the Tournament Producers want to finish me off, now is the time. I sit on the ground, a few yards from the blaze set off by the fireball.

I hear Shyanne's voice, carrying images of rich fabric, and sparkly gems. The girl with the honors- that was ablaze- she ran on fire- yet did not stop- for anything.

What a good laugh the Tournament- makers must be having over that one. Her beautiful costumes have even brought on this torture for me.

The attack is now over. I know he could not have predicted this; it must be hurting for me because he cares about me. In the same way- given the circumstances, showing up stark naked in that chariot would have been safer for me.

The star-makers do not want me dead- he they could give a shit. Not yet anyway.

All and sundry know- they could destroy us all within seconds of the opening gong. The real sport of the tournament is watching the kill one another.

Every so often, they do kill just to remind the players they can. Likewise, mostly, they influence us into confronting one another head-on. This means, if I am no longer being fired, there is at least one other nearby.

A few hours later, the stampede of my feet shakes me from inactivity. I look from place to place in incomprehension. It is not yet

beginning, LIKEWISE, my stinging eyes can see it.

It would be hard to miss the wall of fire descending on me.

My first compulsion is to scramble from the tree, LIKEWISE, I am belted in. Somehow my fumbling fingers release the buckle and I fall to the ground in a heap, still snarled in my sleeping bag. There is no time for any kind of packing. Fortunately, my backpack and a water bottle are already in the bag. I shove in the belt, hoist the bag over my shoulder, and flee.

The world has transformed into flame and smoke. Burning branches crack from trees and fall in showers of sparks at my feet. All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. Likewise, they are much faster, flying through the underbrush so gracefully as my boots catch on roots and fallen tree limbs, that there is no way I can keep pace with them.

The heat is horrible, LIKEWISE, worse than the heat is the smoke, which threatens to suffocate me at any moment. I pull the top of my shirt up over my nose, grateful to find it soaked in sweat, and it offers a thin veil of protection. And I run, choking, my bag banging in contradiction of my back, my face cut with branches that materialize from the gray haze without warning, because I know I am supposed to run.

I would drag myself into a tree and take cover now if I could, LIKEWISE, the smoke is still thick

enough to kill me. I make myself stand and begin to limp away from the wall of flames that light up the sky. It does not seem to be pursuing me any longer, except with its stinking black clouds.

I hate burns, have always hated them, even a small one gotten from pulling a pan of bread from the oven. It is the worst kind of pain to me, LIKEWISE, I have never experienced anything like this.

LIKEWISE, she means minor burns.

She would endorse it for my hands. Likewise, what of my calf?

Although I have not yet dared to inspect it, I am guessing that it is a grievance in a whole dissimilar class.

Another light, daylight, begins to softly emerge. Swirls of smoke catch the sunbeams. My visibility is poor. I can see fifteen yards in any direction.

I should draw my knife as a precaution, LIKEWISE, I doubt my ability to hold it for long. The pain in my hands can in no way compete with that in my calf.

I am so weary I do not even notice I am in the pool until I am ankle-deep. It is spring fed, bubbling up out

of a crevice in some rocks, and blissfully cool. I plunge my hands into the shallow water and feel instant relief. Isn't that what my mother always says? The first treatment for a burn is chilly water? That draws out the heat.

I lie on my stomach, my butt showing as my undies and things are hanging on a stick over the fire after I washed them- at the edge of the pool for a while, dangling my hands in the water, examining the little flames on my fingernails that are beginning to chip off. Good. I have had enough fire for a lifetime.

I bathe the blood and ash from my face and body with my headband- all I have now are my undies to wear- in this fight and what is in my bag. All he has is his boxers at this point to full of holes- he is about 2 miles away- now lost- like me- I try to recall all I know about burns. They are common injuries in the Seam where we cook and heat our homes with coal. Then there are the mine accidents. A family once brought in an unconscious young man pleading with my mother to help him.

The Borough doctor who is responsible for treating the miners had

written him off, told the family to take him home to die. My leg requires attention, LIKEWISE, I still cannot look at it. What if it is as bad as the man's and I can see my bone? Then I remember my mother saying that if a burn's severe, the victim might not even feel pain because the nerves would be destroyed. Encouraged by this, I sit up and swing my leg in front of me.

I went to the woods and hunted the entire day, haunted by the gruesome leg, memories of my father's death. What is funny was, my sister,

who fears her own shadow, stayed, and helped. My mother says healers are born, not made. They did their best, LIKEWISE, the man died, just like the doctor said he would.

Likewise, they would not accept this. He lay on our kitchen table, senseless to the world. I got a glimpse of the wound on his thigh, gaping, and charred flesh, burned clearly down to the bone, beforehand I ran from the house.

I was almost fainted at the sight of my calf. The flesh is a brilliant red covered with blisters. I force myself

to take deep, slow breaths, feeling quite certain the cameras are on my face. I cannot show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does. I cut the remains of the pants leg off at the knee and examined the injury more closely. The burned area is about the size of my hand. None of the skin is blackened. It is not too bad to soak.

Carefully, I stretch out my leg into the pool, propping the heel of my boot on a rock so the leather does not get too sodden, and sigh because this

does offer some relief. I know there are herbs if I could find them, which would speed the healing, LIKEWISE, I cannot quite call them to awareness. Water and time will be all I have to work with.

Should I be moving on? The smoke is slowly clearing LIKEWISE, still too heavy to be healthy. If I do continue away from the fire, won't I be walking straight into the weapons of the Careers? Besides, every time I lift my leg from the water, the pain rebounds so intensely I must slide it back in.

My hands are slightly less demanding. They can handle small breaks from the pool. So, I slowly put my gear back in order. First, I fill my bottle with pool water, treat it, and when ample time has passed, begin to rehydrate my body. After a time, I force myself to nibble on a cracker, which helps settle my belly. I roll up my sleeping bag. Except for a few black marks, it is unscathed. My jacket’s another matter. Stinking and scorched, at least a foot of the back beyond repair.

Despite the pain, drowsiness begins to take over. I would take to a tree and try to rest; except I would be too easy to spot. Besides, abandoning my pool seems impossible. I artfully arrange my supplies, even settle my pack on my shoulders, LIKEWISE, I cannot seem to leave. I cut off the damaged area leaving me with a garment that comes just to the bottom of my ribs. Likewise, the hood's intact and it is far better than nothing. My leg slows me down, like my period- they make me have the blood dripping from there is more than I can take I am naked for no- get them cover in it- I am

out of temperatures no- so I run- LIKEWISE, I sense my pursuers are not as speedy as they were before the fire, either. I hear their coughs, their raspy voices calling to one another.

I spot some water plants with edible roots and make a small meal with my last piece of rabbit. Sip water. Watch the sun make its slow arc across the sky.

Where would I go anyway that is any safer than here? I lean back on my pack, overcome by drowsiness. If the Careers want me, let them find me, I think before drifting into a stupor. Let

them find me. And find me, they do. Luckily, I am ready to move on because when I hear my feet, I have less than a minute head start. The evening has begun to fall. The moment I wake up, I am up and running, splashing across the pool, flying into the underbrush.

I pick a high tree and begin to climb. If running hurts, climbing is agonizing because it requires not only exertion LIKEWISE, direct contact with my hands on the tree bark. I am fast, though, and by the time they have touched the base of my trunk, I am twenty feet up. For a moment, we

stopped and surveyed one another. I hope they cannot hear the pounding of my heart. Still, they are closing in, just like a pack of wild dogs, and so I do what I have done my whole life in such circumstances.

It seems hopeless. Likewise, then something else registers. They are bigger and stronger than I am, no hesitation, LIKEWISE, they are also heavier.

This could be it; I think. What chance do I have to counter them? All six are there, the seven Careers and my boy, and my only consolation is they are

beat- up, too. Even so, look at their weapons. Look at their faces, grinning and snarling at me, a sure kill them.

There is a reason it is me and not he who ventures up to pluck the highest fruit or rob the most remote bird nests. I must weigh at least fifty or sixty pounds less than the smallest Career. Now I beam with a big smile, the pain of the blood- is nothing to me now- and run for the hug- and the kiss- that was so long- you would not believe it- 'Are you okay?'

The crowd will love it as we were naked in arm and arm, and he

picks me up to kiss me yet again. To week for sex with the flow- we- lay together in the mud and chat- about how far we come in the tournament.

49

Faith- a girl that was dying that- we made a pack with ‘You can feed yourself.

Can they?’ I ask.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is to their disadvantage, because they do not know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted, and I do.

Likewise, I am too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I have been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will

turn. Tomorrow, it is the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, LIKEWISE, there are not any.

'Who do you think that was?' I cannot help thinking of My boy.

'I don't know. It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'We'll know tonight.'

‘Who’s left again?’ I ask.

‘The boy from Borough One. Both try LIKEWISE, from Two. The boy from Three.

Thresh and me. And you and My boy,’ says Leah. ‘That’s right. Wait, and the boy from

Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.’ There is someone else, LIKEWISE, neither of us can remember who it is.

‘I wonder how that last one died,’ says Leah.

‘No telling. Likewise, it is good for us. Death should hold the crowd for a bit. We’ll have time to do something before the Tournament Producers decide things have been moving too slowly,’ I say.

‘What’s in your hands?’

‘Breakfast,’ says Fath. She holds them out, revealing two big eggs. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It is a good breakfast anywhere. ‘Ready to do it?’ I say, pulling on my pack and the back of my undies. Like a lost puppy…

‘Do what?’ says Leah, LIKEWISE she bounces up, and you can tell she is up for whatever I propose.

‘Today we take out the Careers’ food,’ I say. ‘Really? How?’ You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she is exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

‘No idea. Come on, we’ll figure out a plan while we hunt,’ I say.

We do not get much hunting done though because I am too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of- Permitted about the Careers’

base. She has only been in to spy on them briefly, LIKEWISE, she is observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they have been leaving another, the boy from Borough 3, to watch over the supplies.

‘The boy from Borough Three?’ I ask. ‘He’s working with them?’

‘Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the ants and bugs and flying things in by the lake,’ says Leah. ‘They

agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard.

Likewise, he’s not excessively big.’

‘What weapons does he have?’ I ask.

‘Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, LIKEWISE, thresh could kill him easily,’ says Leah.

‘And the food’s just out in the open?’ I speak. She nods. ‘Something’s not quite right about that whole setup.’

‘I know. Likewise, I could not tell what exactly,’ says Faith. ‘Melisa, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?’

‘Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in gasoline- we found somewhere this old car sat.’ I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sister. ‘Eat it!’ She giggles.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.’

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come

to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forage in the meadows in a Borough where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, ‘Music.’

‘Music?’ I speak. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. ‘You have a lot of time for that?’

‘We sing at home. At work, too. That is why I love your pin,’ she says, pointing to the blue jay that I’ve again forgotten about.

‘You have a blue jay?’ I ask.

‘Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends.

We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,’ she says. ‘What do you mean?’ I speak.

‘I’m usually up highest, so I’m the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time. There’s a special little song I do,’ says Faith. She opens her mouth

and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. ‘And the blue jays spread it around the orchard. That is how everyone knows to knock off,’ she continues. ‘They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you can’t blame them for that.’

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. ‘Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.’

‘Oh, no,’ says Faith, closing my fingers back over the pin. ‘I like to see it on you. That is how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.’ She

pulls a necklace woven out of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a jagged star. Or it is a flower. ‘It’s a good luck charm.’

‘Well, it’s worked so far,’ I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. ‘Maybe you should just stick with that.’

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she will have time for on her own. We decided to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should

help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag in case it is not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' she asks.

'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, faith decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work.

Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you will know I am okay, only I can't get back right away.'

'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask.

'Haven't you saw them? They've got nests everywhere,' she says. I must admit I have not noticed.

'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I will see you for dinner,' I say.

50

A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first

one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost did not count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and trying to hack off pieces themselves. Greasy Sae had intervened and sent us with our deer to the LIKEWISE, and not before it had been irreparably damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the LIKEWISE. Even though we were known hunters, it would not have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Borough 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky woman named Rooba, came to the back door when we knocked. You do not haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, LIKEWISE, it is a fair price. We took her offer on the deer

and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the LIKEWISE, sharing. Even with the money divided into two, neither permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I got the money for the goat, LIKEWISE, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That cannot hurt anyone. Then I picked up the story in the late afternoon of my sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There is an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I do not know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he has a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines. Likewise, he is lucky. Somewhere along the way, he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides

slowly starve to death. He is filthy and impatient, LIKEWISE, the goats are clean, and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. LIKEWISE, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

‘Leah,’ I whispered. ‘I want that goat for My sister.’

Owning a babysitter goat can change your life in Borough 12. The animals can live off anything, the Meadow's a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It is not even against the law.

'She's hurt pretty bad,' said Leah.

'We better take a closer look.'

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

'Let her be,' said the man.

‘Just looking,’ said Leah.

‘Well, look fast. She goes to the LIKEWISE, her soon. Hardly anyone will buy her milk, and then they only pay half price,’ said the man.

‘What is the LIKEWISE, her giving for her?’ I asked.

The man shrugged. ‘Hang around and see.’ I turned and saw Rooba coming across the square toward us. ‘Lucky thing you showed up,’ said the Goat Man when she arrived. ‘Girls got her eye on your goat.’

‘Not if she’s spoken for,’ I said carelessly.

Rooba looked me up and down then frowned at the goat. ‘She’s not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.’ ‘What?’ said the Goat Man. ‘We had a deal.’

‘We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she’s stupid enough to take her,’ said Rooba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, LIKEWISE, he still wanted that goal off

his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I had been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, LIKEWISE, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. He wanted to see the look on my sister's face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck.

Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen my sister's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat, LIKEWISE, - teacup. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once. My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, LIKEWISE, the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says My boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

‘Oh, no, my boy. They work magic. That thing couldn’t have died if it tried,’ I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my incompetent hands.

‘Don’t worry. I’m not trying,’ he jokes. ‘Finish the story.’

‘Well, that’s it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with the lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss

or something,' I say. 'It was already mad about her.'

'Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?' he asks.

'I think so,' I say. 'Why?'

'I'm just trying to get a picture,' he says thoughtfully. 'I can see why that day made you happy.'

'Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,' 1 say.

'Yes, of course, I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,' says My boy drily.

‘The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,’ I say in a superior tone.

‘Well, it wouldn’t dare do anything else after you saved its life,’ says My boy. ‘I intend to do the same thing.’

‘Really? What did you cost me again?’ I ask.

‘A lot of trouble. Do not worry. You’ll get it all back,’ he says.

‘You’re not making sense,’ I say. I tested his forehead. The lover’s

going nowhere LIKEWISE, up. ‘You’re a little cooler though.’

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I am on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It is my new best friend, Claudius Temple-smith, and as I expected, he is inviting us to a feast. Well, we’re not that hungry and I wave his offer away in indifference when he says, ‘Now hold on. Some of you may already be declining my invitation. LIKEWISE, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.’

I do need something desperately.

Something to heal My boy's leg.

'Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your Borough number, at the Copiousness at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,' says Claudius.

There is nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind.

‘No,’ he says. ‘You’re not risking your life for me.’

‘Who said I was?’ I speak.

‘So, you’re not going?’ he asks.

‘Of course, I’m not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I am running straight into some fight against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Don’t be stupid,’ I say, helping him back to bed. ‘I’ll let them fight it out, we’ll see who’s in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.’

‘You’re such a bad liar, Melisa. I don’t know how you’ve survived this

long.’ He begins to mimic me. ‘I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You are a little cooler though. Of course, I am not going. He shakes his head. ‘Never gamble at cards.

You’ll lose your last coin,’ he says.

Anger flashed my face. ‘All right, I am going, and you can’t stop me!’

‘I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to Copiousness, LIKEWISE, if I am yelling your name, I bet someone can find me.

And then I will be dead for sure,' he says.

'You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg,' I say.

'Then I'll drag myself,' says My boy. 'You go and I'm going, too.'

He is just stubborn enough and just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if he-a does not find him, something else might. He cannot defend himself. I would have to wall him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

‘What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?’ I speak. He must know that is not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I did not even try.

‘I won’t die. I promise. If you promise not to go,’ he says.

We are at something of a stalemate. I know I cannot argue with him out of this one, so I do not try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. ‘Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat

every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!' I snap at him.

'Agreed. Is it ready?' he asks.

'Wait here,' I say. The air's gone cold even though the sun's still up. I am right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And it does not taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how

delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you do not know what fever does to people. He is like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he is going to die if I do not get to that feast. I will keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he will be gone. And I will be here all alone.

Again... waiting for the others.

I am so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He has gotten the medicine- I do not know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It is such a tiny vial though. It must be extraordinarily strong to cure someone as ill as My boy. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall

to the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There is no question, it is sleep syrup. It is a common medicine in Borough 12. Cheap, as medicine goes, LIKEWISE, very addictive. Everyone has had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, LIKEWISE, what good is that? I am so furious I am about to throw Sam’s

last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That is more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries, so the taste will not be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. ‘I’ve brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.’

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly. ‘They’re overly sweet.’

‘Yes, they’re sugar berries. My mother makes jam from them. Haven’t you ever had them before?’ I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

‘No,’ he says, almost puzzled. ‘LIKEWISE, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?’

‘Well, you can’t get them in the market much, they only grow wild,’ I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

‘They’re sweet as syrup,’ he says, taking the last spoonful. ‘Syrup.’ His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and

nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, LIKEWISE, it is too late, he is already losing consciousness. Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I have done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. ‘Who cannot lie, My boy?’ I say, even though he cannot hear me.

It does not matter. The rest of Alsace can.

21- In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It is a slow and arduous process, LIKEWISE, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I am pleased with my work, the cave now is part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, LIKEWISE, it is undetectable from the outside. That is good because I will need to share that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I do not make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden LIKEWISE, not entirely imprisoned.

Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Borough 12 is not likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container, and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy, so he will have some protection while I am gone, LIKEWISE, there is no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. LIKEWISE, I still

might have used the knife. Who knows what I will encounter?

Here are some things I am certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts. I am not sure about Fox-face since a confrontation is not her style or her forte. She is even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she has picked up some weapons recently.

She will be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the other three. I am going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset,

likewise, I know I will have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 on it that Claudius Temple-smith mentioned. I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, LIKEWISE, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had a good long sleep today. I must stay awake. I do not think anyone will attack our cave tonight, LIKEWISE, I cannot risk missing dawn.

So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament makers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they have done. I lay next to My boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It is strange to be so physically close to someone so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Bureau, or Borough 12, or on the moon right now, he would be no harder to reach. I have never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to,

LIKEWISE, I cannot help thinking of my mother and my sister, wondering if they will sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will be canceled. My family can either watch that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they will have privacy at home LIKEWISE, support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that my boy and I

are a team and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Borough 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about my boy and me, especially now that we are together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces- Greasy Sac and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

And Leah. I know him. He will not be shouting and cheering. Likewise,

he will be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he is hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah's not my boyfriend, LIKEWISE, would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the Borough?

Or something more?

I wonder what he makes of all this kissing.

Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I

judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I am careful to leave My boy with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I do not return, and even these would only prolong his life for a brief time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own. He does not need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I am not there to remove it, he will be roasting in it.

My hands are already stiff from the cold, so I take Leah’s spare pair of

socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway. I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I am about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Bureau and pretend to brush away a tear of my own. Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It is as cold as a November night at home. One where I have slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we will sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh, Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, LIKEWISE, I still sorely miss having the

use of my left ear. I do not know what the explosion did, LIKEWISE, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I will be so stinking rich, I will be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I do not try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the

stream and follow the same path back to Leah’s hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another try LIKEWISE, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I am the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There is still more than an hour or two when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach is not up for much more. Thank goodness, I have My boy’s jacket as well as my own. If not, I would be forced to move around to stay warm.

The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there is no sign of the other try LIKEWISE, it is not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have my boy with me? I doubt Fox-face and thresh even know he was wounded. All the better if they think he is covering me when I go in for the backpack.

Likewise, where is it? The arena has lightened enough for me to remove my glasses. I can hear the morning birds singing. Isn’t it time? For

a second, I panicked that I was at the wrong location.

Likewise, no, I am certain I remember Claudius Temple-smith specifying Copiousness. And there it is. And here I am.

So, where is my feast?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Copiousness, there is a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11,

a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one- really, I could carry it around my wrist- that must be marked with a 12.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of Copiousness, snags the green backpack, and speeds off. Fox-face! Leave it to her to produce such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plane, sizing up the situation, and she has hers. She has us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Fox-face

must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I have worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I am watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I am always dreading others, LIKEWISE, Fox-face is the real opponent here.

She has cost me time, too, because by now it is clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats

me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I am able to deflect it with my bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring, and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, LIKEWISE, the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, LIKEWISE, it is enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the

severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I am at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it is too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I am turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the

sharp, metallic taste of my blood. I stagger backward LIKEWISE, still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for my sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby,

guarding her, waiting for Thresh and my boy.

‘Where is your boyfriend, Borough Twelve? Still hanging on?’ She asks.

Well, if we are talking, I am alive. ‘He’s out there now. Hunting Leah,’ I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. ‘My boy!’

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. LIKEWISE, her head whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she is at least considering I am telling the truth. Since not My boy

appears to save me, she turns back to me.

‘Liar,’ she says with a grin. ‘He’s nearly dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You have him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What is in the pretty little backpack?

That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he’ll never get it.’

Clove opens her jacket. It is lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a Leah, curved blade. ‘I promised Permitted if

he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show.'

I am struggling now to unseat her, LIKEWISE, it is no use. She is too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

'Forget it, Borough Twelve. We are going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. What was her name? The one who shopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then you, and then I think we will just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?' Clove asks. 'Now, where to start?'

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it is a block of wood and she is deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, LIKEWISE, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. ‘I think. ‘She almost purrs. ‘I think we’ll start with your mouth.’ I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I will not close my eyes. The comment about Permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down if I can see, which will not be an extended period, LIKEWISE, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my small way, undefeated.

‘Yes, I don’t think you’ll have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?’ She asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She

flushes with rage. ‘Alright then. Let us get started.’

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my boy’s arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good- I say…

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I am vaguely aware that my headaches. I have the flu, and therefore I am allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I have been asleep a long time. My mother’s hand strokes my cheek, and I do not push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to

know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still do not trust her. Then there is a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I am scared.

'Melisa,' it says. 'Melisa, can you hear me?'

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I am not home, not with my mother. I am in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I

feel better. ‘My boy.’ ‘Hey,’ he says. ‘Good to see your eyes again.’

‘How long have I been out?’ his mom asks. They sent him to a hospital for she gets the money. There was only one more… now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

‘Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,’ he says. ‘I think it’s stopped finally, LIKEWISE; I wouldn’t sit up or anything.’

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My

boy holds a bottle to my lips, and I drink thirstily.

‘You’re better,’ I say.

‘Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,’ he says. ‘By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.’

He does not seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. I am just too beat-up, and I will hear about it later when I am stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he is all gentle.

‘Did you eat?’ I ask.

‘I’m sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don’t worry, I’m back on a strict diet,’ he says.

‘No, it’s good. You need to eat. I’ll go hunting soon,’ I say.

‘Not too soon, all right?’ he says. ‘You just let me take care of you for a while.’

My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his blood. I’m reloaded,

shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, ‘Are there more?

Are there more?’

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shoved the boy away from her and pulled out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it is far beyond my capacity to heal, beyond anyone’s. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There is no point in comforting

words, in telling her she will be all right. She is no fool.

Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it is me who is dying instead of Faith.

‘You blew up the food?’ she whispers.

‘Every last bit,’ I say.

‘You have to win,’ she says.

‘I’m going to. Going to win for both of us now,’ I promise. I hear a cannon and lookup. It must be for the boy from Borough

1.

‘Don’t go.’ Faith tightens her grip on my hand.

‘Course not. Staying right here,’ I say. I move closer to her, pulling her head

onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair back behind her ear.

‘Sing,’ she says, LIKEWISE, I barely catch the word.

Sing? I think. Sing what? I do know a few songs. Unbelievably, there was once music in my house, too. Music I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice- LIKEWISE,

I have not sung much since he died. Except when my sister is extremely sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby.

Sing… My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke, and fatigue. Likewise, if this is my sister's, I mean, Leah's last request, I must at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with, it is old, incredibly old, I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music teacher calls mountain air. Likewise, the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow

will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today.

I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin: Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes and when again they open, the sun will rise. Here is the place where I love you.

Her eyes have fluttered shut. Her chest moves LIKEWISE, only slightly. My throat releases tears, and they slide down my cheeks. Likewise, I must finish the song for her.

Everything is still and quiet. Then, eerily, the blue jays take up my song.

For a moment, I sat there, watching my tears drip down her face. Leah’s cannon fires. I lean forward and press my lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I lay her head back on the ground and release her hand.

1

They will want me to clear it up now. So, they can collect their bodies. And there is nothing to stay for. I roll the boy from Borough 1 onto his face and take his pack, retrieve the arrow that ended his life. I cut Leah’s pack from her back as well, knowing she would want me to have it LIKEWISE, leave the spear in her stomach. Weapons in bodies will be transported to the hovercraft. I’ve no use for a spear, so the sooner it has gone from the arena the better.

I cannot stop looking at Leah, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting. I cannot bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, LIKEWISE, seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from Borough 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It is the Bureau I hate, for doing this to all of us.

Leah’s voice is in my head as a memory like all of them now- but one. His ravings against the Bureau are no longer pointless, to be ignored. Leah’s death has forced me to confront my

fury against the clear, the injustice they inflict upon us. Likewise, here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence.

There is no way to take revenge on the Bureau. Is there?

Then I remembered my boy's words on the roof. 'Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to. To show the Capitol they do not own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Tournament.' And for the first time, I understand what he means.

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to

make them accountable, to show the Bureau that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of everything they cannot own. That Permitted was more than a piece in their Tournament. And so am I.

The boy from Borough 14 dies before he can pull out the spear in this room at the hospital.

A few steps into the woods grows a bank of wildflowers. They are weeds of some sort, LIKEWISE, they have blossomed in beautiful shades of violet, yellow, and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Leah’s side.

Slowly, one step at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers.

Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair in bright colors.

They will have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they will have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then, and now I did it. I step back and take a last look at Leah. She could be asleep in that meadow.

'Bye, Faith,' I whisper and crazed out. I press the three middle

fingers of my left hand against my lips and kiss her there too- and hold them out in her direction.

Then I walk away without looking back.

The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a blue jay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft. I do not know how it knows. It must hear things that humans cannot. I pause, my eyes focused on what is ahead, not what is happening behind me. It does not take long, then the general birdsong begins again, and I know she is gone.

Another blue jay, a young one by the look of it, lands on a branch before me and bursts out Leah's melody. My song, the hovercraft, was too unfamiliar for this novice to pick up, LIKEWISE, it has mastered

her handful of notes. The ones that mean she is safe.

'Good and safe,' I say as I pass under its branch. 'We don't have to worry about her now.' Good and safe.

I've no idea where to go. The brief sense of home I had that one night with Permitted has vanished. My feet wander this way and that until sunset. I

am not afraid, not even watchful. Which makes me an easy target. Except I would kill anyone I met on sight. Without emotion or the slightest tremor in my hands. My hatred of the Bureau has not lessened my hatred of my competitors in the least. Especially Careers. They, at least, can be made to pay for Leah's death.

No one materializes though. There are few of us left and it is a big arena. Soon they will be pulling out some other device to force us together. Likewise, there has been enough gore today. We will even get to sleep.

I am about to haul my packs into a tree to make camp when a silver parachute floats down and lands in front of me. A gift from a sponsor. LIKEWISE, why now? I have been in decent shape with supplies.

Sam's noticed my despondency and is trying to cheer me up a bit. Or could it be something to help my ear?

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It is not the fine white Bureau stuff. It is made of dark ration grain and shaped like a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. I flashback to my boy’s lesson on the various Borough

bread in the Training Center. This bread came from Borough 14. I cautiously lift the still-warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of Borough 14 who can't even feed themselves? How many would have had to do without scraping up a coin to put

in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Leah, surely. Likewise, instead of pulling the gift when she died, they had authorized Sam- to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me, they do not like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever

reason, this is a first. A Borough gift to a who is not your own.

I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. ‘My thanks to the people of region 11,’ I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized.

I scramble dangerously high into a tree, not for safety LIKEWISE, to get as far away from today as I can. My sleeping bag is rolled neatly in Leah’s pack.

Tomorrow I will sort through the supplies that she had- I cannot know it is just too hard for me to do.

Tomorrow I will make a new plan. Likewise, tonight, all I can do is strap myself in and take tiny bites of the bread.

It is good. It tastes like home.

Soon the seals in the sky, the anthem plays in my right ear. I see the boy from Borough 1, Leah. That is all for tonight. Six of us left, I think. Only six. With the bread still locked in my hands, I fall asleep at once.

2

Sometimes when things are particularly bad, my brain will give me a happy dream. A visit with my father to the woods. An hour of sunlight and cake with my sister. Tonight, it sends me Leah, still decked in her flowers, perched in a high sea of trees, trying to teach me to talk to the blue jays. I see no sign of her wounds, no blood, just a bright, laughing girl. She sings songs I have never heard in a clear, melodic voice.

On and on.

Through the night. There is a drowsy in-between period when I can hear the last few strains of her music although she is lost in the leaves. When I am fully awakened, I am momentarily comforted. I try to hold on to the peaceful feeling of the dream, LIKEWISE, it quickly slips away, leaving me sadder and lonelier than ever.

Heaviness infuses my whole body as if there is a liquid lead in my veins. I have lost the will to do the simplest tasks, to do anything LIKEWISE, lie here, staring

unblinkingly through the canopy of leaves. For several hours, I remain motionless. As usual, it is the thought of my sister's anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy.

I give myself a series of simple commands to follow, like 'Now you have to sit up, Melisa. Now you must drink water, Melisa.' I act on the orders with slow, robotic motions. 'Now you have to sort the packs, Melisa.'

My boy pack holds my sleeping bag, her empty waterskin, a handful of nuts and roots, a bit of rabbit, her extra

socks, and her slingshot. The boy from Borough 1 has several knives, two spare spearheads, a flashlight, a small leather pouch, a first-aid kit, a full bottle of water, and a pack of dried fruit. A pack of dried fruit! Out of all he might have chosen from.

To me, this is a sign of extreme arrogance. Why bother to carry food when you have such a bounty back at camp? When you will kill your enemies so quickly, you will be home before you are hungry? I can only hope the other Careers travelled so lightly when it

came to food and now find themselves with nothing.

Speaking of which, my supply is running low. I finish off the loaf from Borough 11 and the last of the rabbit. How quickly the food disappears. All I have left are Leah's roots and nuts, the boy's dried fruit, and one strip of beef. Now you must hunt, Melisa, I tell myself.

I obediently consolidate the supplies I want into my pack. After I climb down the tree, I conceal the boy's knives and spearheads in a pile of rocks so that no one else can use them. I have

lost my bearings what with all the wandering around I did yesterday evening, LIKEWISE, I try and head back in the general direction of the stream. I know I am on course when I come across Leah’s third, unlit fire. Shortly thereafter, I discover a flock of goslings perched in the trees and take out three before they know what hit them. I return to Leah’s signal fire and start it up, not caring about the excessive smoke. Where are you, Leah? I think as I roast the birds and Leah’s roots. I am waiting right here.

Who knows where the Careers are now? Either too far to reach me or too sure this is a trick or… is it possible? Too scared of me? They know I have the bow and arrows, of course, Permitted saw me take them from Glimmer’s body, LIKEWISE, have they put two and two together yet? Figured out I blew up the supplies and killed their fellow Career? They think Thresh did this.

Wouldn’t he be more likely to revenge Leah’s death than I would? Being from the same Borough? Not that he ever took any interest in her.

I doubt they think my man has lit this signal fire. Leah's sure he is dead. I find myself wishing I could tell my boy about the flowers I put on Leah. That I now understand what he was trying to say on the roof. Perhaps if he wins the Tournament, he will see me on victor's night, when they replay the highlights of the Tournament on a screen over the stage where we did our interviews. The winner sits in a place of honor on the platform, surrounded by their support crew.

Likewise, I told Permitted I would be there when she was alive. For

both of us. And somehow that seems even more important than the vow I gave my sister.

In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It is a slow and arduous process, LIKEWISE, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I am pleased with my work, the cave now is part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, LIKEWISE, it is undetectable from the outside. That is good because I will need to share

that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I do not make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden LIKEWISE, not entirely imprisoned. Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Borough 12 is not likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container, and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy, so he will have some protection while I am gone, LIKEWISE, there is no point.

He was right about camouflage being his final defense. LIKEWISE, I still might have used the knife. Who knows what I will encounter?

Here are some things I am certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts.

I am not sure about Fox's face since confrontation is not her style or her forte. She is even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she has picked up some weapons recently. She will be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the

other three. I am going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset, LIKEWISE, I know I will have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, LIKEWISE, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had a good long sleep today. I

must stay awake. I do not think anyone will attack our cave tonight, LIKEWISE, I cannot risk missing dawn.

So, cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament Producers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they have done. I lay next to my boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It is strange to be so physically close to someone so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Bureau, or Borough 12, or on the moon right now, he would

be no harder to reach. I have never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, LIKEWISE, I cannot help thinking of my mother and my sister, wondering if they will sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will be canceled. My family can either watch that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they will have privacy at home LIKEWISE, support in

the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that my boy and I are a team and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Borough 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about my boy and me, especially now that we are together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the

screens, urging us on. I see their faces - Greasy Sac and Madge and

even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

-And-

Leah, I know him. He will not be shouting and cheering. Likewise, he will be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he is hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah’s not my boyfriend, LIKEWISE, would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the Borough?

Or something more I wonder what he makes of all this kissing. Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I am careful to leave my boy with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I do not return, and even these would only prolong his life for a brief time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own.

He does not need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and

during the day, if I am not there to remove it, he will be roasting in it. My hands are already stiff from the cold, so I take Leah's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway.

I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I am about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Bureau and

pretend to brush away a tear of my own.

Then- I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It is as cold as a November night at home. One where I have slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we will sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh,

Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, LIKEWISE, I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I do not know what the explosion did, LIKEWISE, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I will be so stinking rich, I will be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and

flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I do not try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Leah’s hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I am the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There is still more than an hour or two when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach is not up for much more. Thank goodness, I have my boy's jacket as well as my own. If not, I would be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there is no sign of the other try LIKEWISE, it is not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have my boy with me?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Copiousness, there is a disturbance on the plain. The ground

before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one really, I could carry it around my wrist that must be marked with a 14.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of Copiousness, snags the green backpack, and speeds off. Neahie! Leave it to her to produce such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still

poised around the plane, sizing up the situation, and she has hers. She has us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Neahie must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I have worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I am watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I am

always dreading others, LIKEWISE, Neahie is the real opponent here.

She has cost me time, too, because by now it is clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side- so I can hear it and I am able to deflect it with my bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring, and send an arrow straight at Clove’s heart. She turns just enough

to avoid a fatal hit, LIKEWISE, the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, LIKEWISE, it is enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I am at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it is too small to fit on any other part of my

anatomy, and I am turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my blood. I stagger backward LIKEWISE, still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for my sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and my boy.

'Where is your boyfriend, Borough

Twelve? Still hanging on?' she asks. Well, if we are talking, I am alive. 'He's out there now. Hunting Leah,' I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. 'My boy!'

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. LIKEWISE, her head's whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she is at least considering I am telling the truth. Since not my boy appears to save me, she turns back to me.

'Liar,' she says with a grin. 'He's nearly dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You have gotten him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What is in the pretty little backpack? That medicine

for Lover Boy? Too bad he'll never get it.'

Clove opens her jacket. It is lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a Leah, curved blade. 'I promised Permitted if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show.'

I am struggling now to unseat her, LIKEWISE, it is no use. She is too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

'Forget it, Borough Twelve. We are going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. What was her

name? The one who shopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then you, and then I think we will just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?' Clove asks. 'Now, where to start?'

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it is a block of wood and she is deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, LIKEWISE, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. 'I

think. ‘She almost purrs. ‘I think we’ll start with your mouth.’ I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I will not close my eyes. The comment about Permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down if I can see, which will not be an extended period, LIKEWISE, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my small way, undefeated. ‘Yes, I don’t think you’ll have much use for your lips

anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?' she asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. 'Alright then. Let us get started.'

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my boy's arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good- I say…

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I am vaguely aware that my headaches. I have the flu, and therefore I am allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I have been asleep a long time.

My boy's hand strokes my cheek, and I do not push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still do not trust her. Then there is a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I am scared.

'Melisa,' it says. 'Melisa, can you hear me?'

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I am not home, not with my mother. I am in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the

unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. ‘My boy.’ ‘Hey,’ he says. ‘Good to see your eyes again.’

‘How long have I been out?’ his mom asks. They sent him to a hospital for she gets the money. There was only one more… now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

‘Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,’ he says. ‘I think it’s stopped finally, LIKEWISE; I wouldn’t sit up or anything.’

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My boy holds a bottle to my lips, and I drink thirstily.

‘You’re better,’ I say.

‘Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,’ he says. ‘By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.’

He does not seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. I am just too beat-up, and I will hear about it later

when I am stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he is all gentle.

‘Did you eat?’ I ask.

‘I’m sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don’t worry, I’m back on a strict diet,’ he says.

‘No, it’s good. You need to eat. I’ll go hunting soon,’ I say.

‘Not too soon, all right?’ he says. ‘You just let me take care of you for a while.’

I stand a chance of doing it now. Winning. It is not just having the arrows or outsmarting the Careers a few times, although those things help.

Something happened when I was holding Leah's hand, watching the life drain out of her. Now I am determined to revenge her, to make her lose unforgettably, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable.

Rat-

Eventually, I wrap up my food and go back to the stream to replenish my water and gather some. Likewise,

the heaviness from the morning drapes back over me and even though it is only early evening, I climb a tree and settle in for the night. My brain begins to replay the events from yesterday. I keep seeing Permitted speared, my arrow piercing the boy's neck. I do not know why I should even care about the boy.

(2 weeks Back)

Then I realize he was going to be her first kill. Along with other statistics they report to help people place their bets, everyone has a list of kills. Technically I would get credited

for Glimmer and the girl from Borough 4, too, for dumping that nest on them. Likewise, the boy from Borough 1 was the first person I knew would die because of my actions. Numerous animals have lost their lives at my hands, likewise, only one human. I hear a Permitted saying,

'How different can it be, really?'

Amazingly like the execution. A bow pulled; an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I do not even know. Somewhere his family is weeping for

him. His friends call for my blood. He had a girlfriend who believed he would come back.

Likewise, then I think of Leah's still body and I can banish the boy from my mind. At least, for now.

It has been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we will get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it is going to be tonight, I want to get some sleep first. I cover my good ear to block out the strains of the anthem, LIKEWISE, then I hear the

trumpets and sit straight up in anticipation.

My sister was found dead in her cell… at night.

The only communication the try LIKEWISE, get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. Likewise, occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Tournament Producers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere known to all like Copiousness, as an inducement to gather and fight. Sometimes there is a

feast and sometimes there is nothing but, a LIKEWISE, a loaf of stale bread for the LIKEWISE- to compete for. I would not go in for the food, LIKEWISE, this could be an ideal time to take out a few competitors.

Before I can stop myself, I call out my boy's name to see if he is alive, he is not.

I cried so hard… I clap my hands over my mouth, already escaped this hellish land. I do- with an arrow- of all things… the boy is down there is a shock I hear this… they want the boy to get it, I think.

3

The sky goes black, and I load the gun- there will be no winner- I scream and I shot myself- to be with him somewhere

where this hell is not this place. I about to let it go off- Stop! The baby would give- up to his mother- she is with me now- my last wishes in the note, I have in my bag. The screen has the look of OMFG!

I win the BITCH!

He was the last to go- and it was a natal death… all I have is this

baby- that is ours- yet at that moment I could not go on… they were holding out on me three weeks I might add just to see how strong I am. SICK! I never dated another boy- they call out all the names- and I am taken to safety. I instruct myself, although I wish I just get home… or wherever I go now that I have nothing. I will have it all- yet that is not him! I live alone in a big home- and take care of my baby that I could have left behind- I named her after me. Melisa…

(Up to the point of the present day)

Now turning back toward the painting and away from me. Her parents will stay fighting no matter what you do, and even if you miraculously paid off her house, and try to get the love back they had when they made her. A lot of miraculous things have happened before their eyes over me, to make this work, yet at every turn, I feel as if I have failed.

Nevaeh- (Remembering more flashbacks of my life and his too, like hayrides with Jaylynn, and long walks and love, I lost over getting bitter and getting sour on life.)

(6 months back to Naddalin, before the war)

‘I was thinking I could save it, and even her too.’ I look over her shoulder inside her body still, giving me a pointed look, sensing that is exactly what I planned to do- ‘well, they’d probably end up selling it- the home and even her to the mob if they need too, and that is just what they did… so they could split the proceeds and end up moving anyway.’

I knew she was going to have to fight this war- I knew it and I was in

her to give her the strength of two women.

Naddalin, inside Melisa - She sighs hard, with a voice softening when she looks at all the kids and towns being reduced to rubble and even the loss of her family. It was all becoming too real for me even, seeing France in a way ending- the tower hanging by threads in Paris. Hot ash for trees, and toppers holding kids at gunpoint, over stilling clothing, and food, even water.

Naddalin’s report back to the afterworld- ‘They want to sugar-coat this by saying this is an annual event,

yet that would be a lie for the press, and to give the people of peasant leave some glimmer of hope that is non-extent.'

'I'm sorry, ever. I do not mean to sound like some jaded old man, but I am. I have seen far too much and made so many mistakes-you've no idea how long it took me to learn all these things. But there is a season for everything-just like they say. And while our season may be eternal, we can never let on.'

She was looking around the home that was left in a state of being half-standing, all that was left was one

painting that she did, ‘Above and beyond that now it was done by a famous artist, a painted portrait, of the girl who was found inside her?’

I knew what that meant, yet I never really needed a thank you, yet the question was to me, she painted me before I was even part of her, as if meant to be.

Rumor has it- as far as those fighting parents go, and I paraphrase, the story goes they like drawing a bath together, they did not want to live through all this and elasticated

themselves, or so the press said, yet that is the corked press- is it not?

‘Cyanide- would have been easier would it have not? I am sure there is hell no, over the hell they put their little girl though.’

How many gifts did you receive from others that don’t have it?’ I shake my head.

‘I’m sure those portraits lived on!’

-And-

‘I’m sure someone kept a journal and put your name in it!’

I am sure, that you live on even if it is all me inside you now, not over the fact I want to be you over the face, you passed and I am immortal, so you could stand your rights as a young woman, in your homeland.

I- Naddalin now feel, that I have found my place in life and on Earth.

Portion

…And now, I am modeling the rest of my days in New York? That looks as it did at the turn of the century, all yellow and hazy, sick, and

tinted with toxins. The sky is a fireball of fury.

Even though this world is nearing the end and the people in it- LIKEWISE- do not want to see the fact that it is, the ecosphere has become dumb down, to that of kids having the mentality of pre-K, and robots are taking over as life- and the working population.

‘What about that?’

‘I agree with any of it.’ she shrugs, to reporters- back to the mysterious world. (Yet, to journalists on Earth it is all the same yet and acts, of

opposites- hidden behind a fake smile- a sweet innocent-looking face, and a young body to lust over.)

'I was vain, full of myself, a textbook narcissist- and boy did I have fun, and now I can look back at two lives and see why I was oh- so- wrong.'

Her laughs, face transforming into the one I know and love, the sexy Naddalin, the fun Naddalin, so opposite of the forebearer of doom. 'But you must understand, those portraits were all privately commissioned, even back then I knew better than to allow them to be publicly displayed. And as for the

modeling, it was just a few pictures for a small-time ad campaign. I quit the next day.'

'So why did you stop painting? I mean, it seems like a wonderful way to record an unnaturally long life.'

My head is beginning to spin from all of intensity.

She nods, 'the problem was my work was becoming very well known, and this girl was shy and understated like me I guess, I was high by the feeling- and the dugs- that became cheap and believe me, I exalted in my exaltedness. Look what I have made

this girl into as a woman, celebrity of big- fake hero, worshipped, and sacred.'

'The dumber you look to this world, the more you prized and worshipped- over the fact of that dumb.'

'Now, that I am back where, I truly belong and recovering, I have this in my reports of a book of life in my story just some chapters. Not mine to give even yet the need compared to someone else's story, that was fare more extortionary than mine. She the

real hero… not me.’ Said Naddalin, after have a nervous breakdown.

‘A story of lingering, liberty, and independence- like this one should not be glossed over, by others and will not, understand me, for the bravery, courage, and valor!’ She screamed wildly.

She laughs and shakes her head, saying ‘…and now you are sitting next to me, with no wings- NO WINGED- over the fact- you have not earned them yet, but- BUT- I feel she should not be here, with them anyways-

she is too pure, to be one of us, all fallen, and wicked.

‘You’re a war Hero,’ said Kristen, not malevolent.

‘I was painting like a madman, completely obsessed, uninterested in anything else.’ I was going to begive for my new life, all I had to do was say yes to lingering in another body on earth. Or go to the lost parts of the Heavens. I chose to linger in another, and that girl's name is Marcella.

Amassing an exceptionally enormous collection that drew far too much attention, to me saying that, yet I

wanted to live life, not death, for myself- that was the chance of a lifetime before I properly realized the risk, and then, I was wiped in tunneling, a beam of light, into this girl as her new soul.’

I- Melisa looks at her- beforehand from above, new heart crashing, with exhilaration, and butterflies. When I see the image unfold in her head, it was too late to change my mind back, life as a prevailing life had started.

I- Naddalin, said, additionally, thought, and expressed that this was and is a complete death sentence.

‘And then there was a passion,’ I whisper, seeing violent, orange flames rise into a darkened sky.

‘Everything was destroyed.’ She nods. ‘With, for all appearances anyway, me.’

I suck in my breath, hold it some- and blow out my cheeks, meeting new eyes- in a world that I have not seen in years. I was unsure what to say, to them or even how to react, interact, or even relate to humanity what-so-

ever, or the lack of it, from what I could see by looking around, life was flaccid and next to dead.

‘And before they could even extinguish the flames, I was gone, running for my life.’

Traveling all over Europe, or what was left of it, I had seen photos of WW2 and what France looked like after having blood dripped on every inch or so-o, fleeing from place to place like a nomad, a gypsy, a tramp even-changing my name a few times, to hide for the police officers that would make misdemeanor and felony, over stand-up

and having a thought in your head. I knew I had to get back to the US. And that was the next step yet- and I got on my first high-speed built-train- and steaked accursed the skies, at night, elevated 300 feet up over the dystopian cityscape- glowing in LEDs and neons.

‘Call me- Melisa now, I have not even had much time to think up a last name- yet, like it matters anyway. She Alleged… as confused as ever with her on identity and lost in the fact, she was a week to week starting over somewhere new.

Besides, until enough time had passed, and people started to forget, yet with them, it would not be hard to do, they were all losing their home, no work, and no money to be had- for any, the schools a joke… even more than in the past, I did not think it was possible, yet I was wrong, as usual.

Finally, settling in at Paris- was also a joke- my life's wanting to have this was a pun, and I was made the ass- in the deal, where, as you know, we first met and, well, you know the rest.

But then again, this choice, I made was forever- or 'till death, and

then I go back for re-review of placement.’

All eyes look into my eyes- faded with no reason or buttressed thought, hurry up and wait, and a more the belligerent, aggressive, loud-mouthed, and quarrelsome, correspondingly, yet that is the stigma placed down on me.

I was adapting, wishing I did not have to say it- it is choosing- life over death, but knowing it is necessary to put it into words, somehow what I am seeing- I cannot- other than horrific,

even though I already know what has come.

‘All of them is saying that at some point- not long from now you and I, will have to move- not a city to city, not state to state, not even continents, but worlds away, like never before.’

And the moment she says- ‘we’re going to all dice aren’t we,’ to a bunch of other girls her age- some did not even move or even blink; it was if they were in a trance, at this point they were all classed by age and size, and gender. It was freezing at night and blazing during the day.

I can hardly believe, I had not thought of it before, that I was going to make this trip, at some point.

I mean, it is so obvious that I had to be blasted to a new world to live, hiding right in plain sight, I was, and this new world was offering so much- I could not pass it up even if I were one of the first to make the move. Up till then, there was yet, a year, like- before I could go, and the new worlds were still in their infancy- not even named yet- yet I was more than existed, thrilled, anxious and with the heebie-jeebies.

Also, yet somehow… I was able to ignore it- and take in these last days on this old world that was going to be no longer- and think I would be one of these people to live during this time of history being made.

I wonder what would be lost and what would be gained… In this new world, and if it would look anything like the one, I was momentarily left behind- forever. Think about it like 3 ½ billion years of life- gone in less than a year of it slowly dying and neglect.

QUESTIONS-

Increasingly more questions of wounded and thinking- the questions of possibilities.

…?...

LIFE AND WINSOME and then transferred- by us, to keep past wisdom. I even asked the question of if this was what happened 3 billion years ago- with Earth. And that was Adam and Eve, and God was the person to start a new Species?

-And-

Then the tree of life was the only thing to ensure it and the only

thing brought over to the new plant, and the 7th day was a man, born… (and that was the light of the new world,) I had a lot of questions and theories, all the madness. Yet, I put them all in my notes.

I need to stop thinking aloud… don't I?

The question of my child would be one of the first to populate this new world, that is if I would have a child, I am still young… many- many thoughts.

look the other way, at this thought, would be madness also- I was looking at adds of the new, Boeing X-38

pretending it would be different for me, I remember the past, and not liking short flight, now were spanning worlds- in manufactured aircraft. Which just shows you what denial can do.

‘You probably won’t age much past the- a year,’ she continues- to hear the voices say.

My hand smooths my cheek.

‘Trust us your trip will be out of this world,’

It went on to say- ‘It won’t be long before your friends start to notice, they do not want to live without you,

tell them to make this trip with you- why don’t you.’

…And the thought came, I have no friends here to say that to… or family, the thoughts of life without is not much of one, rushed through my head as fast as they add seeing the three-dimensional film video, going faster than the speed of light.’

Please… I smile, desperate to add a little lightness to the dark, heavy space.

~*~

(May, I remind girl- I was saying this in my mind,) you that we live in an orange and yellow world of death- pollution, and self-inflicted addiction disease? You stay here you are going to end up killed or dying with something unheard of…

A home where plastic surgery is practical- the norm! Everything is perfect, nobody ages there. Seriously- Nobody, we can carry on just as we are for the next hundred years!' It like the afterlife… and is becoming more like that every day, I wounded if death will be a thing in time to come?

I laugh, but when I look at Emmah, thanks to my power she respects me now too, see the way her eyes peer into mine- with love like when she was nine, it is clear the gravity of the situation trumps my small joke- that the other God has played on me.

'What do I tell Jaylynn?' I whisper, as Nevaeh as my little girl sits beside me, slipping an arm around me and I am easing her fears like a small child, that I never had in the past to love. At last, I have my child back in my mothering arms, and my daughter

respects me, as I should have without the hex of them, taking over my days and life- and even after-life. And I have loved it… and all enemies have been exterminated.

I heard for the bench in the center of the room, plopping onto it, as I bury my face in my hands.

‘I mean, it’s not like I can fake my death. That crime-scene investigation stuff’s a little more advanced than it was in your day.’

~*~

(Thoughts)

‘What do I tell Jaylynn?’ I-Emmah whispers, as Nevaeh sits beside me, happier than ever, slipping an arm around me and easing my fears- too, that she could have my life, by a flick of a pen.

‘I mean, it’s not like I can fake my death, she would know, and doing what the other girl did is a death entice, worse than death.’

That crime-scene investigation stuff’s a little more advanced than it was in your day- I say in the girl’s head, I have seen what it is now on Earth-

and here it is about the same. These worlds become more alike every day.'

'Odd those, could get away with murdering and I can't,' and she giggles oddly to herself, knowing that she has the victory of getting just in time.

'I wonder if there will be a need for an afterlife in some years to come, also?' They were pondering thoughts.

'We'll deal with it when the time comes,' she says to us. 'I'm sorry, I should've mentioned this all before, it takes up most of my time.'

We- Emmah and Jaylynn- nonetheless, when we look into her eyes, we know it would not have mattered, she wanted us to approve of her, so we did, out of fear- really- not loyalty. I am sure that others feel the same as we do, about everything too.

Would not have made the least bit of difference. Remembering all things past, the day when she first presented the whole idea of immortality to me- and being able to live in the 7 leaves of purgatory of the abyss- in this world, and others like Earth.

Like- how careful she was to explain, I was the one to make the choices to go up or down, fallen, or heavenly, that I would never cross the bridge- and know, I never been with my family again, that I was in control of my destiny, just as Naddalin becoming Melisa.

Nevertheless, I went for it anyway, saying ‘I would be there for her any way I could…’ as Jaylynn.

Pushed the thought right out of me. Figuring I would find a gap, determine a way to work around all of that- keen to convince myself of about

anything if it meant being with her for perpetuity, and it is no different here and now.

Also, though I have no idea what I will say to Jaylynn, or how I will even begin to explain our sudden abandonment to our friends or now, I did back then, over the fact we had none, in the end, all I want is to be with her and forget the past and the remembers of all things that we are passed- it is giving me a headache. It is the only way my life feels complete though to surpass the memories of all things past- to have a future.

‘We’ll enjoy a good life, Eternally, I promise you that, I will make up for it to you both in a way possible.’ She said to both of us with compassion.

You will never experience any shortage, and you will never be bored again. Not after realizing the magnificent possibilities of all that exists, if you believe.

Though aside from you and me- all our outside acquaintances will be extremely short-lived, the world we call Earth is dying- and become next to a hellish wasteland, I pulled out now

before, there is war, on our own, I have chosen to see them off to new worlds, if they were on Earth, to be soldered, for the life that is going to become- there.

'There's just no getting around it, no dodging like you think, Earth is DONE- it is fried, cooked even. It's a necessity, simple as that.'

I- Emmah, take a deep breath and nod, memorizing where I foremost met her and how she said something about being bad at farewells, I get why now- I think- I do.

I- Nevaeh, nonetheless, thought nothing of it, she is just

Emmah, responding to my thoughts when she says, ‘I know, goodbye is never a thing with you.’

You would think it would get easier, right? No…! But it never really does; I usually find it soother to just disappear and avoid everything and anything altogether.’

‘Easier for you maybe, though, as Jaylynn- I’m not so sure about those you’ve left behind.’

I thought that was humorous, amusing, and funny in my mind thinking we have all been ‘LEFT BEHIND.’

‘Just like you, I know that you have, you can’t deny, you couldn’t deny the life that you lived, deny the anger that is inside of you, letting it out, letting it out.’

‘I stay strapped, with tournament, bitches, their lame, walk into the school, walking up to preps, I want to make a fool, I am so lame, and they’re so cool, I’ll drown their ass in the Barnesboro pool.’

‘You don’t want me to spit this hardcore, make a fancy drum score, with blood, still my redox, like mud, so I

go back to my table, laugh at me like I am the lint of navel.'

'Get up in the mooring to see the old man snoring, just to go to school, and see my friends- snooze more than me and score, you know, I had no car, I knew- I was no gangster, I knew it was not hard, attest it was funny, making my nose blood and runny.'

'Let us see what reject is next on my list. To break their freaking wrist, make a fist and shove them in their locker, like a regular dork, that like chick-rock, yet they do not think I

would do such a crime, I am a nerd that has been left behind.'

'You hate me, and I hate you, and you don't know what I have been thought, and you get love and I get hate, don't ask for- forgiveness, it's too late.'

'Think about all the people that you made cry, think about all that you've left behind, and if you feel that you have been left behind for years, and you never realized piss on the world, no one gives a shit.'

'You can do anything if you put your mind to it, don't let the prep hit

your brain and make you insane, don't let yourself fade away, take the AK- and spray for fame… they don't want to mess with this name, they don't want any heat, steep in the boxing ring, just put on your cheerleader pompoms, with spicy sauce jockstraps…'

'…Your riches are all just bitches, I had no money, and that is what it is like to be poor; to be razed by a hippy or a press pill poppa and a Heroin- hoe, I developed through this water… and it grows bigger as I got older, preps- jocks, hitting anybody that steep on the block… hating the preps

with their Polo shirts and matching socks, and then the hate and haters only got bigger…’

‘Hey, like- I thought we were all the same. Yeah- well I said, Freak that- and I pulled the trigger.’

‘What good is it if it will never change, one death won’t change a world-mind, I’ll be another left behind- or suicide.’

~*~

She nods, rising from the bench and pulling me up alongside her, saying your words will be seen by this

world. Not to still but to help all that have been like you.

‘I’m a vain and selfish woman, what can I say?’

‘‘Maybe- just bitter, or crazy…’ your words, not mine- right?’

‘You have Asperger’s Syndrome, don’t you?’ Says Emmah.

‘Likely… yet never proven.’

The test I did said this- ‘Your score was 24 out of a possible 50. Scores in the 0-25 range indicate few or no Autistic traits.’ Odd missed it by one point, yet that also has been my

life, I have an IQ of 154 too, said some, yet that was never proven either.'

'That's not what I meant-' I shake my head. 'I just-' 'please.'

She looks at me… 'There's no need to defend me. I know what I am- or at least what I used to be.'

She gets up, leading me away from the paintings she came here to see, this. Only, I am not ready to go.

Not yet… Anyone who is stripped of their greatest passion just simply walked away like she has, deserves a second chance.

I let go of her hand and shut my eyes tightly, establishing a large canvas, a wide selection of brushes, a comprehensive palette of paints, and whatever else she might need before she can stop me, I say paint, what you think this new world would be like, and if it is that good, I may use it.

‘What’s the idea here?’

She gazes between the easel and me.

Saying- ‘I am a God, after all, I can make worlds happen and dreams come true or shatter them in a blink of my eyes.’

‘Wow, it has been a long time if you can’t even distinguish the tools of the trade.’

I smile some…

She then peers at me, gazing intensely, unwavering, but I meet it with equal strength.

Someday I would be taking her place, I knew… I knew- I would.

‘I thought it might be enjoyable for you to paint alongside your friends. …All of you…’

I shrug, watching as she grabs a brush from the table, turning it over in the palm of her hand.

‘You said we could do anything we want, right?

‘Yeap!’ Said Nevaeh

That the normal rules no longer apply, and we can make this world as we wish? On the canvas you have complete freedom, wasn’t that the point of the trip, also for this girl?’

‘Yeap, see you’re getting me…’ Said, Nevaeh

She looks at me, expression wary but yielding, her new world depends on you and your imaginations, not mine, that why I am out of it- totally- and completely and do not have blame.

‘So-o you have become God to these new worlds?’ asked Jaylynn.

‘Um-hum,’ was the replay.

‘Then if that’s the circumstance, then I think you should paint something, it is after all your worlds, to them, and your people.’

‘So, what the religion…?’ It was asked curiously by mostly all in the room.

‘Ha- I don’t know that yet either, or if there is even going to be one, all that makes is hate, simple-minds, and war.’

‘Create something beautiful, grand, everlasting, whatever you want. And as soon as you are finished, we will mount it alongside your friends. Leaving it unsigned, of course.’

‘I’m far past the point of needing my work to be recognized,’ she

says hastily, looking at me, eyes filled with light, bright blue in shade.

‘Good,’ I nod, signaling toward the blank canvas. ‘Then I expect to see a work of pure inspired genius with self-image involved.’ All you girl has made these new worlds as you paint them, there all refitting you, my chosen devotee girls of 14 called the kannattajat of strength and wisdom, remember that…

Just beforehand, they all had their hand on her shoulder, they all dropped their heads with eyes closed- muttering in trances, think hard about

your world, you are going to make, Nevaeh giving a nudge- to replace, and they had their ideas. ‘You should probably get started though girls; the night is limited.’

I glimpsed between the painting, palm pressed to my chest- just like theirs, at a complete loss for words, at what I was seeing.

Knowing whatever I say could never- ever define what is before me. Absolutely no words will do at all- I am at a loss.

‘It’s so-o’ I pause, feeling small, undeserving, unquestionably- not

worthy of an image so- magnificent, superb, wonderful, splendid, glorious, brilliant, majestic, grand, royal, outstanding, regal, noble, and honorable.

'It's so beautiful- and transcendent- and' I shake my head-' and on no account is that me!'

She laughs, eyes meeting mine when she says, 'Oh it's you all right.' Smiling as she is taking it all in.

'In fact, it's the personification of all your incarnations. A sort of compilation of you of the last four hundred years, of what would be

perfection. Your hair and creamy skin hailing straight from your life in Amsterdam- like the life that is now walking these worlds, strong, yet feminine, and full of life, yet unemotional in places to remember hardship, your confidence and conviction from your past days, your unpretentiousness and inner métier was taken from your difficult life.'

Your elaborate dress show lake wrapped within the grounds, in a way, and flirtatious gaze lifted straight from your humanity days, while the eyes

themselves- blue like the cloudless days.’

She shrugs at me, turning toward me, saying and the nights are as warm as you all to me.

‘They remain the same, it would be wonderful, yet I am going to let then change this world to their liking, static is not life, undying either, no matter what semblance you wear- it always changing, as it should.’

‘And now, you must turn it over to them, and already there is a war, on one that I am not going to stop, as you

all know, yet Earthlings are taking what is not theirs here… so-o.’

I whisper, gaze focused on the canvas, taking in the most radiant, glorious, luminous, winged creature- a true goddess descending from the heavens above, eager to bestow the new Earth called FDR, with her gifts, she gives in just living.

Knowing it is quite possibly the most beautiful image I have ever seen, but still not getting how it could be me, that there reflecting.

‘What part of me is taken from now?

Other than the eyes, I mean, and then I let it all in, even remembering parts of me that I could not evoke were still there.'

'Emmah has FDR- almost done, even if war is to come on it.'

'Why… your delicate wings, of course.'

I turn, assuming she is ever-so jokey until I see the stern expression motif her face.

'You're quite cataleptic of them, I know.'

She nods some to me.

Nevaeh- ‘Nonetheless, have faith me, they’re there. Having you in my life is like a gift from above- even if, a gift I surely- don’t deserve, but one I give thanks for every day, even if I was pushed away.’

‘Please, like- like- I’m hardly that good-or kind-or splendid- or even remotely angelic like you seem to think.’ Said Emmah.

I shake my head, saying ‘that why I chose you for this… you’re showing it now.’

‘You sure about the- everything?’

She glances at her beautiful unsigned painting and those of her friends.

‘Unquestionably.’ She then nods. ‘Imagine all the bedlam that’ll result when they find it professionally framed and mounted on the wall, and then you can reach in and go there, as it spins, in real-time.

‘…Like doors of perception?’

…?...

‘Kinda!’

And I mean the good kind of revolution.

Besides, just think of all the people who will be called upon to study them, trying to determine just where it came from, how it got here, and who could've perhaps created it.'

She nods, glancing at it one last time before turning away, saying I hope this is good. But I grab her hand and pull her back to me, saying, 'Stop saying negatives, this is you would see. Remember when- you were unable to?

-And-

They like you will see it through eyes that well see it in diverse ways too.

Don’t you think we should rename it? She questioned, you know, add a little figurine like the name to it, like the other ones should have also?’

She glances at her watch, more than a little distracted now, that I have nothing to do with- it is up to the living lives to do that.

‘I’ve never been much good at titling my work, always just went with the obvious, anyway.’

Like Ted of the stuffed brown bear, and bunny for the stuffed pink rabbit.

‘Well, it’s probably better not to name it Ever with Wings, Angelic Ever, or anything remotely like that anyways.

I tilt my head and gaze at her, determined to do the work for her they have chosen.

‘Any references to why they went with this?’

‘Yes, the past man from their world, of leaders called presidents, before your time, and even mine, and some after my death too.’ She spoke.

She looks at me briefly, before she gazes begins to wander, to other things- with fascination.

‘How about- enchanted – or even enchantment - or- I do not know, something like enthralled?’ I press my lips tightly together- as I let it go, thinking the same thing yet, roles are roles.

‘Enchantment?’ She turns toward me, saying we can subtitle them underneath the names are given by them.

‘Well, we are obviously under spell- by you are we not? Like- if you think that bears a resemblance to us.’

I laugh, watching her eyes light up as she laughs along with me, saying, and that is why your world is the one it is too, and you do not even see it as I do.

‘Allure it is also known as planet Trump.’ She nods yes, I would say that fits you and your world that you have made, back to business again, is what that one is all about. ‘But we need to make the inscription quick- I’m afraid we- have already done that too.’

We nod, closing our eyes and envisioning the plaque in my head, whimpering- about the wonders we see ahead. ‘What should I use for the artist- anonymous or unknown?’

‘Either’ she says, voice hurried, apprehensive, eager to move on choosing unidentified because I like the sound of it, I lean forward to inspect my work, asking, ‘What do you think?’

She grasps my hand and pulls me alongside her, moving so fast my feet never once touch the ground.

Sprinting down the long series of halls, taking the stairs as though they are not even there.

The entry door is just within view when the whole room goes bright, and the alarm begins to sound.

‘Oh my!’ they all cry, alarm crowding my throat as she picks up the pace.

Voice hoarse and scruffy when she says, ‘I didn’t plan this being this way- I hope you all like this,’ she said to the crowds- within the auditorium, discontinuing as we reach the stage.

I turn to her, body rolling on the inside, skin slick with sweat, aware of the footsteps behind us, the shouts ringing out- of expectancy. Standing wordlessly beside her, unable to move, unable to shriek, her eyes closed in deep concentration, urging the complex spell to make the world happen in the sour system.

But it is too late to change anything now. They are already here, and they are all ready to move, the time has come.

So, I raise my arms in renunciation, of what was to come with

this one world- to another, ready to accept my fate- and theirs,' I'm yanked out the door and toward the blooming fields around the school- in relief.

Or at least I projected the school, ideas into the new world to become, I thought.

Emmah intended ever-so-carefully in the most important ensconced thoughts of her design, heading toward her new home, within the village. A gift from being one of the chosen, that the others did not know about yet.

She could see the future, like- then so, we find ourselves in the middle of a busy highway instead- a slew of speeding cars honking and skidding as we scramble to our feet and hurry to the side, gazing all around and catching our breath as we try to determine where we are. ‘It’s going to become industries, in some undetermined locations, falling all over ourselves. I am sure of it, in ways that I could not even dream.’

I say this, glancing at the new home and breaking into a laugh so contagious; it gets silly. All of us

huddled in the same devilment, and so untrusting to the girl that it made it all happen, even mocking her, and looking at; on the side of a litter-strewn thoroughfare.

‘How’s that for breaking out of a furrow?’ I thought.

I almost had a panic attack back there- I thought for sure we would- have something for this, yet I never thought it would be like this. I catch myself snorting and shaking my head. I gasp at the inside of this new home, shoulders shaking remembering the lingering of all our pasts and the

remembrance of all that was previous and lingering.

‘Didn’t I promise- I’d always look after you and keep you from harm?’ A hand pinned note said, as she was reading, just moments before hands it was sitting on the furor table.

I nod, remembering the words, but unfortunately, the last few minutes are still etched on my brain.

‘How about a car then? A car would be good about now, don’t you think?’

Every one of them heads the newest, and the best- within this world.

‘Can you even imagine what those guards thought when first given the rights to look over me- and the others, us the cars, and the home alike, always surrounded by five-man, as if celebrity- star.’

The door opens without me pushing it, and insuring me in, adding- was a voice within the room and in my head- soft yet hunting- keeping me on time- and logged, ‘The security cameras like a strip around the room was the best in this world!’ Before

closing my eyes and taking care of them too, I say think you to my God who is a woman, just like me, and that inside of us all is that kind of power.

…God- is a woman…!

~*~

(Early the next morning.)

Ten minutes early in fact.

(Then it happened back on earth…)

The end, not of the story- but theirs… if they did not make the movie off Earth.

That day… it was chosen what Earth would become now that it was next to inhalable.

Portion

(Courtroom)

‘Impressions, what does that mean?’

‘What do they stand for, and why do they ever-so need rights? Life or robot life to imitate it- that is made as human even having feelings that would support the fact of having a soul. What defines a being, individual, soul, even creature? As a person or life, or

living? What defines possessions, properties, belongings, even stuff?'

'What is the variance, change, dissimilar, or even the discrepancy of medication? Personhood what is the anthropologist and ethicist arguing that all those standards for... self-awareness included, to understand with the ability too, and having emotions of complexity... and capacity, with volume, and measurements for empathy.'

'We're all-in contract, agreement, promise, covenant, and even treaty, that Impression is now

considered not life, and not have the same rights as human life.’

Rolling by the judge-

‘Impression is now equal to all human, by USA law.’

(The gavel smacks!)